RACIALIZED IMMIGRANT AND INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE STUDENTS' SENSE OF BELONGING, SAFE SPACE, AND INCLUSIVE PEDAGOGY

By

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Dedication

To my wife, whose steadfast support, patience, sacrifices, motivation, and encouragement have been my anchor throughout this challenging yet fulfilling pursuit.

To my beloved parents, whose enduring love, blessings, and guidance have shaped my journey and instilled in me the values of perseverance and lifelong learning.

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Abstract

This study explores racialized immigrant and racialized international students' experiences of belonging, safety, and inclusive pedagogy in Higher Education (HE). Conducted at the University of Manitoba, a Western Canadian research university, the study investigates how these students perceive their social and academic environment, the factors influencing their sense of belonging, and how their experiences inform Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) practices. Guided by a qualitative phenomenological case study approach within a social constructivist framework, the research employed in-depth semi-structured interviews with 13 participants. These interviews captured lived experiences and perspectives related to intersecting identities of race, gender, and sexual orientation. Thematic analysis, primarily informed by critical race theory (CRT), revealed recurring themes of exclusion, marginalization, microaggression, resilience, and counter-stories. Participants frequently experienced marginalization in academic and social contexts, highlighting Eurocentrism in curricula, challenges in cultivating safe classroom spaces, and institutional struggles to integrate the contributions of minoritized students. Despite these barriers, participants demonstrated resilience through coping strategies such as seeking peer support, navigating institutional power dynamics, and developing spaces of agency. The study underscores the need for systemic change in HE to address structural inequities that impede genuine inclusion. The study concludes with implications for practice around institutional culture, mentorship, and spaces of agency. Findings contribute to the broader EDI discourse by exposing the gap between institutional rhetoric and the lived realities of racialized immigrant and international students, advocating for transformative strategies to foster authentic belonging in academic environments.

Keywords: Sense of belonging, safe space, inclusive pedagogy, EDI, intersectionality, microaggression

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Chapter One

Research Context and Research Questions

Introduction: Background of the Study and Context

Canada's higher education institutions (HEIs) have experienced a significant transformation over recent years, largely driven by the country's favorable immigration policies and increased access to postsecondary education. These policies have led to a more racially and culturally diverse student population, shaping the landscape of postsecondary education across the nation (Cukier et al., 2021; Schinnerl & Ellermann, 2023). This growing diversity has spurred numerous Canadian HEIs to adapt, modify, and expand their services and programs to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student body (Cukier et al., 2021). Moreover, many institutions have recognized the importance of reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, acknowledging the need to address historical and ongoing inequities (Poitras Pratt & Bodnaresko, 2022). Even though Indigenous scholars and communities often advocate for distinct approaches that honor their unique historical and cultural contexts (Leroy-Dyer, 2018; Verbos & Humphries, 2014), these approaches, while tailored to the distinct needs and rights of Indigenous students, are also connected to wider equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) perspectives. Despite this evolution, challenges persist, as these institutions are found to struggle to embrace EDI effectively. While many universities have incorporated EDI principles into their strategic plans, tangible outcomes remain limited, and systemic barriers persist. For instance, studies have highlighted the underrepresentation of racialized and Indigenous scholars in academia, suggesting that institutional commitments to diversity are not always reflected in tangible outcomes (Henry et al., 2017). Additionally, the persistence of microaggressions and implicit biases within academic environments further impedes the realization of genuine

inclusivity (Smith, 2010). In a similar vein, the latest report by Universities Canada (2022) highlighted that although 77% of universities reference EDI in their strategic planning, only 44% have established specific performance indicators to measure progress, which Tamtik and Guenter (2019) claimed is a gap between policy and practice and also an indicator of a lack of student voice in EDI policymaking.

In response to the changing demographic composition of their student bodies, Canadian post-secondary institutions have increasingly been called upon to demonstrate their commitment to promoting EDI on campus. Although many institutions have taken steps to address these challenges, systemic barriers and historical legacies of exclusion continue to hinder progress (Tamtik & Guenter, 2019). Canadian universities, despite their increasingly diverse student populations, often maintain structures that perpetuate a "white privilege region," creating hostile environments for students from minoritized demographics (Choi, 2016; Henry et al., 2017). This disconnect between institutional rhetoric and students' lived experiences has led to a growing recognition that more needs to be done to bridge the gap between policy and practice. The COVID-19 pandemic further complicated the situation for international students, who are a critical component of Canada's diverse higher education (HE) population. Despite a 17% decline in international student enrollment in 2020 due to the pandemic, the numbers rebounded in 2021, with over 621,600 international students studying in Canada (Crossman et al., 2022). In response, most Canadian colleges and universities have been increasingly called upon to demonstrate their commitment to promoting campus EDI (Drazenovich & Mazur, 2022). This increase in enrollment highlights the enduring appeal of Canada's education system and, at the same time, underscores the importance of addressing the systemic challenges these students face, particularly in terms of inclusion and belonging.

While Canadian universities are often seen as global leaders in promoting multiculturalism and diversity, the persistence of systemic barriers and implicit biases against equity-seeking groups, such as racialized minorities, Indigenous peoples, women, individuals who identify as Two-Spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex, asexual, or other non-normative sexualities and genders (2SLGBTQIA+), and people with disabilities, remains a critical issue (Clark et al., 2014; Henry et al., 2016). These barriers manifest in various forms, including unequal access to resources and opportunities, misrepresentation of Indigenous cultures, and personal biases against students from marginalized groups. Scholars have argued that the efforts of modern neoliberal institutions to advance EDI agendas frequently amount to little more than "cosmetic diversity" and superficial reforms (Ford & Patterson, 2019; Henry et al., 2016; Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016). While intended to promote inclusion, such efforts often fail to address the deep-rooted systemic issues perpetuating inequality.

The concept of EDI is often debated in terms of both its meaning and application. Diversity, conventionally understood as encompassing factors such as race, gender, age, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and ability, extends beyond these categories to include acknowledging and appreciating differences and the capacity for equitable participation in society (Hays, 2016). Equity, often associated with fairness, requires recognizing systemic power and privilege imbalances within HEIs and striving to eliminate barriers that prevent full participation by marginalized groups (Burke & Lumb, 2024). The University of Manitoba's (UM) President's Task Force on EDI (University of Manitoba, 2020) defines equity as the "guarantee of fair treatment, access, opportunity, and advancement for all students, faculty members, and staff, while at the same time striving to identify and eliminate barriers that have prevented the full participation of marginalized groups" (p. 88). However, eliminating these

barriers must be approached with caution, as doing so without regard for cultural diversity risks further marginalizing minority groups. For example, religious practices may be viewed as barriers by the majority, but eradicating them could result in the loss of cultural identity for students who are strongly devoted to their faith. This issue is particularly salient in discussions of policy development, where EDI stakeholders rarely consult students (Tamtik & Guenter, 2019), resulting in policies that reflect Western or Euro-Canadian perspectives rather than the diverse experiences of the student body (University of Waterloo, n.d.; York University, 2020). In this context, international students are often viewed as "ideal immigrants" or commodified as sources of revenue, further complicating their integration into Canadian universities (Scott et al., 2015; Stein & de Andreotti, 2016).

The challenges facing Canadian universities are emblematic of a broader issue: EDI is often treated as a "wicked problem"—a term used to describe complex social issues that are difficult to solve due to their systemic nature (Stein & de Andreotti, 2016). Wicked problems, such as systemic racism, white supremacy, and colonial legacies, resist easy solutions and are often addressed through superficial initiatives rather than meaningful progress. For example, while some HEIs have made efforts to increase the recruitment of diverse students, staff, and faculty, significant differences remain in how these institutions acknowledge and address EDI issues (Tamtik & Guenter, 2019). Therefore, the multifaceted nature of EDI requires a comprehensive approach that goes beyond policy statements and mission declarations. Campbell (2021) noted that organizations often default to rule-based approaches when forced to reckon with internal EDI shortcomings rather than addressing the underlying cultural and behavioral patterns perpetuating exclusion. This approach, while expedient, often fails to create the long-term changes necessary to foster true inclusivity.

A growing body of research demonstrates that fostering a genuine sense of belonging among students, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds, is essential for promoting student engagement and success (Museus & Chang, 2021; Strayhorn, 2019a). Inclusive pedagogy, which integrates diversity into curriculum and teaching practices, significantly shapes students' sense of belonging and learning experiences. Instructors' employment of inclusive teaching methods that value diverse backgrounds fosters respect and active participation among students (Hockings, 2010). This approach emphasizes creating universal learning environments that support participation for all students rather than differentiating based on challenges (Florian & Beaton, 2018). Recent studies have highlighted that diverse curricula and adaptive teaching practices enhance academic experiences and create supportive classroom environments (Bernard et al., 2019; Childers-McKee, 2023; Sanger, 2020a). However, students often feel excluded when teaching methods fail to accommodate varied learning styles or when course content lacks diverse representation (Dare & Nowicki, 2018). By prioritizing curricular diversity and inclusive strategies, instructors ensure students feel validated and respected, promoting equity and participation (Florian & Beaton, 2018). This study seeks to contribute to the growing body of literature on EDI by examining how minority identity markers, such as race, gender, and sexual orientation, impact students' sense of belonging and safety in HEIs. The study will focus on UM, exploring how the concepts of belonging and safety may serve as key indicators of EDI progress. Campus climate and culture play a significant role in shaping students' experiences of belonging, and this study aims to shed light on the specific factors that foster or impede these experiences for racialized immigrant and racialized international students.

Research has shown that a positive sense of belonging is associated with a supportive campus climate and culture (Elkord, 2017; Museus & Chang, 2021; Neufeld et al., 2016;

Strayhorn, 2019a). Conversely, a lack of belonging can lead to negative academic and personal outcomes for students from marginalized groups. For example, racial minority students often experience lower self-esteem and self-efficacy compared to their white counterparts, while 2SLGBTQIA+ students may face discrimination and exclusion based on their sexual orientation or gender identity (Ahmed, 2019; Choukas-Bradley & Thoma, 2022; Nadal et al., 2014). International students are frequently perceived as outsiders and are often expected to assimilate by acquiring local knowledge to integrate into the academic environment (Jones, 2017; Leask, 2015). However, this process of stigmatization does not necessarily intersect with or extend to students who belong to other marginalized identity groups. For instance, queerness is often interpreted or assumed based on external markers such as gender expression, clothing, mannerisms, or self-disclosure. Yet, individuals who do not conform to stereotypical or widely recognized representations of queerness may find their identity less visible or unrecognized in certain social contexts (West, 2024). Given these dynamics, I assert that fostering a sense of belonging and ensuring safety are essential components in creating an inclusive learning environment that supports diverse student identities. Therefore, I contend that sense of belonging and safety are crucial elements for creating an inclusive learning environment. Without these foundational elements, students are unlikely to engage fully in their academic and social lives, which can have long-term consequences for their development and success (Strange & Banning, 2015). According to Strange and Banning (2015), belonging and safety are the base of a hierarchy of needs within the educational environment, similar to Maslow's (1968) hierarchy of needs. When these basic needs are not met, students cannot achieve higher levels of engagement and learning. Therefore, creating a safe and inclusive environment is critical for fostering a positive campus experience for all students.

This study explores how belonging and safety function within the broader context of campus ecology, examining how these factors influence EDI efforts at the University of Manitoba. By focusing on students' perceptions and experiences, the study aims to provide insights into how institutions can refine their EDI initiatives better to support the diverse needs of their student populations. The findings will contribute to the ongoing dialogue about the role of HEIs in promoting inclusivity and equity, particularly in the face of growing diversity and the persistence of systemic barriers.

Researcher's Positionality

My positionality as an immigrant student, with a background shaped by colonization, and my roles as both a teacher educator and researcher deeply inform my interest in the topic at hand. My personal and professional experiences have driven me to explore the complexities of fitting into new environments, especially within academic institutions. The challenge of adapting to a new setting is multifaceted, and this experience underscores the need for institutions to prioritize creating environments where all students, regardless of background, can feel a sense of belonging and safety. These inclusive learning environments are vital for the well-being and academic success of students.

Since my first year at the University of Manitoba, I have wrestled with a fundamental question: does "mattering"—defined as the feeling of being needed or valued by a group (Strayhorn, 2019a) hold significance in this academic community? While this study does not aim to resolve that question fully, my experiences thus far have illuminated the reality that mattering is often reduced to a transactional process within academia. The focus is frequently on the mechanics of education: enrollment, completing courses, accumulating credit hours, and earning a credential. Institutions offer resources like academic workshops, mental health sessions, and

financial aid to help students navigate these stages, but this focus misses something deeper—students' intrinsic need to belong and feel safe within these academic spaces, a need that becomes particularly evident when they leave their home country, social networks, and familial support to begin anew in an unfamiliar setting.

Maslow's (1968) hierarchy of needs is relevant to this discussion, as students progress through their academic careers often without their more foundational needs for safety and belonging being addressed. These needs remain crucial, yet they are often overlooked in favor of other academic goals. My own journey, despite significant effort and commitment, has made me question whether I truly belong, especially within the academic framework at the University of Manitoba.

My experiences upon arriving in Winnipeg, adapting to diverse living conditions, and navigating the complexities of a new academic and social landscape reflect a journey that is not unique to me alone. The process of assimilation into an unfamiliar environment is often assumed to be part of the normal transitional experience for students. However, this assumption fails to account for the systemic challenges faced by some students, particularly those labeled as "racialized," even before they embark on their academic journey. My engagement with course materials and university resources revealed the profound impact of such labels and the ways in which they shape students' experiences in academic settings.

As a second-language English speaker, I often found myself overly preparing for class—concerned about my communication in English, assignments, and class activities and focused on how I would ask any questions in class and on my approach to teachers and other students, not simply out of diligence but because of a perceived threat (the fear that my contributions would be judged through the lens of my identity). This "stereotype threat" is a well-documented

phenomenon among students from marginalized backgrounds, who are acutely aware of how they might be perceived in educational settings (Healey & Stroman, 2021). My preparation, though rigorous, was driven by subconscious fears of acceptance and rejection. This experience led me to study the concept of "belonging uncertainty," defined as "doubt as to whether one will be accepted or rejected by key figures in the social environment" (Cohen & Garcia, 2008, p. 365).

Research, such as that by Barnett and Felten (2016), has documented how students from marginalized backgrounds often arrive on campus with a profound sense of social and academic nonbelonging. My experiences reflected this reality, as I found myself navigating unfamiliar academic spaces at the University of Manitoba that led to feelings of insecurity and isolation. This lack of safety and belonging is a significant barrier to students' success and well-being.

Fostering a sense of belonging, particularly for students from marginalized backgrounds, is no simple task. In a diverse classroom setting, providing equitable space for all students to express themselves is essential, yet challenging (Stephens et al., 2012; Strayhorn, 2019a). For students in unfamiliar environments, the fear of judgment or rejection can undermine their ability to fully participate in knowledge production. In some instances, students may feel compelled to remain silent to protect their dignity, rather than risk negative responses from their peers. I observed this dynamic in a class discussion on race and culture, where a female student stopped participating due to the conversation's intensity. This incident highlighted the importance of emotional and epistemic safety—ensuring that students can engage without fear of humiliation or rejection (Harless, 2018).

Despite the challenges I faced, there were moments of connection and support. Small acts of kindness, such as being offered food by a fellow student, receiving help with directions, or

being assisted by a classmate, provided me with moments of belonging. These interactions, though brief, were meaningful and helped counterbalance the feelings of isolation I often experienced.

Teacher interactions played a significant role in shaping my sense of belonging. While some teachers may not have been fully aware of the effort I was putting into my courses, others recognized my needs and provided guidance that helped me navigate the academic challenges I faced. Their support was instrumental in affirming my academic abilities and fostering a sense of belonging. This validation was crucial in helping me feel that I was valued and capable of succeeding in this academic environment. These interactions serve as a reminder of the importance of creating a supportive and inclusive academic climate, where students feel acknowledged and encouraged to grow.

This discussion brings attention to the importance of inclusive pedagogy, particularly within the classroom context. Strayhorn (2019a) emphasized that belonging is context-dependent and that affirming student success requires addressing cultural assumptions and recognizing students' diverse backgrounds. Unfortunately, I rarely observed these inclusive strategies being implemented in the classroom. However, I did have one positive experience: Later in my program, a class activity allowed us to introduce ourselves through a 5-minute speech titled "Who I Am." This exercise provided an opportunity to share my personal experiences and background, fostering a sense of connection with my peers and teacher. Such inclusive pedagogical strategies play a vital role in promoting a sense of belonging and safety in academic settings.

Finally, my positionality as an immigrant student with a distinct social location continues to shape my perceptions, experiences, and beliefs. However, I recognize that my experiences are

not representative of all students. I am curious about how students from diverse backgrounds perceive the academic environment and what their experiences can contribute to the University of Manitoba's efforts toward EDI. These reflections underscore the importance of creating inclusive and supportive academic spaces that affirm the diverse experiences and needs of all students.

Research Objective and Questions

The study aims to explore racialized immigrant and racialized international students' perceptions and experiences of belongingness, safe space, and inclusive pedagogy in HE at a Western Canadian research university, with special attention to the intersection of race with additional social identities (gender and sexual orientation) in the classroom setting. Racialized sexual and gender diversity perspectives were embedded in the research questions that guide this study:

1. What are racialized immigrant and racialized international students' perceptions and experiences of belonging, safe space, and inclusive pedagogy in HE?
2. What are the factors that either hinder or promote their sense of belonging and experience of safe space and inclusive pedagogy, and what strategies have they developed in response to these specific experiences?
3. What can we learn from those students' experiences to help refine EDI approaches and practices?

Rationale and Significance of the Study

While much of the existing research (e.g., Gopalan & Brady, 2020; Murphy et al., 2020; Pedler et al., 2022) has predominantly focused on objective measures such as student engagement, academic performance, and campus integration to examine the sense of belonging

among college and university students, this study addresses a crucial gap by focusing on the subjective experiences of racialized immigrant and racialized international students. Specifically, it explores their perceptions of belonging and safety within the framework of intersecting social identities, including race, gender, and sexual orientation. The study contributes to enhancing EDI efforts by shedding light on how these students experience and navigate the complexities of belonging and safety in a HE environment.

This study is distinctive in that it examines a specific cohort—racialized immigrant and racialized international students—that encounters compounded challenges arising from intersecting racial, gender, and sexual identities. Previous research has highlighted the benefits of cross-racial interactions in promoting positive outcomes in HE (Bowman, 2013), but there is a growing need to explore how interactions across other demographic differences (e.g., gender and sexuality) further shape students' experiences. In this sense, the study expands the scope of EDI efforts by employing an intersectional analysis of race, gender, and sexuality to examine how these identity markers influence students' sense of belonging and safety in the classroom. This intersectional lens (Crenshaw, 1995) draws upon critical race theory (CRT) and its application beyond traditional feminist perspectives, making this study particularly relevant in addressing the multiple dimensions of marginalization faced by students in HE.

By examining the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality, this study also extends the discourse on intersectionality in HE settings. While Crenshaw (1995) originally coined the term "intersectionality" to address the unique experiences of Black women in the labor market (Collins, 2020), this research broadens the scope to include binary and non-binary students, using intersectionality as an analytical tool to unearth the layered experiences of racialized immigrant and racialized international students. Thus, the study transcends gender-specific inquiries and

mobilizes intersectionality to explore the complex realities that emerge when multiple identity markers converge in a given learning context.

Given the centrality of EDI in HE, this study is particularly timely and significant. It provides a platform to amplify the voices of racialized students whose experiences are often marginalized, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of how identity-based factors affect belonging and safety. The findings will offer important insights for HE institutions seeking to foster more inclusive pedagogical practices and environments, helping to bridge the gap between policy intentions and the actual experiences of minoritized students. In doing so, the study will highlight the ways in which HE institutions must move beyond mere policy rhetoric to address the systemic barriers that racialized students encounter (O'Keeffe, 2013).

The growing focus on inclusive pedagogy, particularly in the last decade, reflects a shift in HE research from examining structural barriers to investigating how teaching and learning cultures impact student learning outcomes or experiences (Kahu & Nelson, 2018; Kezar & Maxey, 2014; Stentiford & Koutsouris, 2021). However, a persistent gap remains in understanding the lived experiences of racialized immigrant and racialized international students, particularly in relation to how individual differences are treated within diverse classrooms. This study responds to that gap by providing a nuanced exploration of how racialized students experience differentiation within the learning environment and how such experiences shape their perceptions of belonging and safety.

Furthermore, the current study intensively investigates two subjective markers, namely a sense of belonging and safety, drawing on the findings of the University of Manitoba's EDI survey report (University of Manitoba, 2020), for three reasons. Firstly, gaining greater clarity regarding how racialized immigrant and racialized international students comprehend a sense of

belonging and safety and the factors that develop and influence these perceptions can help institutional leaders and policy planners evaluate the effectiveness of EDI efforts, focusing on students at risk of institutional oppression in one form or another – even either overt or covert. Secondly, an examination of sense of belonging and safe space can help to understand the experience of this group of students as they navigate challenges associated with these two markers during their studies. Thirdly, this investigation can help to identify if a sense of belonging and safety can be used as key indicators to measure the progress of EDI. Like every framework, EDI requires overseeing and measuring progress; in other words, EDI discourse invokes "difference" as a central concept. Correspondingly, the question, "How do we know we are making progress?" (Smith, 2009, p. 251) must be posited, and the answer to this question requires the development of key indicators (such as sense of belonging and safety). These two key indicators can serve to measure EDI progress through regular analysis of demographic differences in the campus environment (in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, ability/disability, sexual orientation, socioeconomic, cultural status, political and religious belief, and alike).

Ultimately, this study makes a valuable scholarly contribution by exploring how racialized immigrant and international students' sense of belonging and safety are shaped by their interactions within the classroom space. This study focus is particularly relevant given the UM President's Task Force on EDI report (University of Manitoba, 2020), which underscored the importance of fostering a sense of belonging and safety within the learning community. As Allen et al. (2021) and Strayhorn (2019b) have argued, the perception of belonging is a central element in students' overall well-being and academic success. By investigating how these students perceive their connections with peers and faculty, and whether they feel accepted and recognized in the learning community, this research provides a cross-analysis of how identity-based factors

influence their sense of inclusion. The insights gained from this study will offer a comprehensive understanding of the barriers and opportunities faced by racialized students, thereby informing more effective and targeted EDI practices within HE institutions.

Theoretical Frameworks

Given the research purpose and questions listed above, the main theoretical framework within which this study is situated is CRT, along with theories of students' integration, engagement, and involvement, which are helpful paradigms considering the context of inquiry. Additionally, the broader context of the study and the nature of its participants (immigrant and international students) necessitated the employment of ecological and validation theory to substantiate the analysis of the study and help to comprehend deeply the context in which this study was located. Using the multiple lenses of these relevant theories allowed the study to investigate what the target groups had been experiencing within classroom spaces regarding belongingness and safety and to produce results to help EDI efforts build an inclusive learning community. A vignette of CRT followed by its principles and why they are relevant to the study will be presented at the outset of this section, and as the section unfolds, it will explain how other theories and tenets were operationalized in the study.

Critical Race Theory

The civil rights movement in the United States laid the foundation for CRT, which focuses on social justice, liberation, and economic empowerment (Tate, 1997). CRT emerged from the critical legal studies (CLS) movement in the 1970s, addressing CLS's failure to consider "race and racism in U.S. jurisprudence" (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004, p. 26) and the struggles experienced by people of colour (Brown & Jackson, 2013; Taylor, 2009; Yosso, 2005). Scholars, including Brown and Jackson (2013), have noted that CRT was spurred by historical

changes and the need to respond to them. CRT critiqued CLS's limited attention to race, calling for a new legal research agenda that centered on racial dynamics (Brayboy, 2005; Taylor, 2009). This led scholars to develop approaches that addressed racial manifestations more directly (Martinez, 2020; Museus, 2013). As indicated, CRT, as a form of legal scholarship intending to understand the detrimental prevalence of white supremacy and its intentional and inadvertent oppression directed at people of colour being extant and perpetuated, has played a pivotal role in the scholarship of racism and race relations.

CRT has positioned race and racism as issues at the center of analysis and interrogated privileged norms in U.S. society (Parker & Villalpando, 2007). As a theoretical framework, it interprets racial inequality as deeply embedded in societal structures. It emphasizes marginalized voices and challenges privilege structures rooted in white supremacy, promoting social justice (Crenshaw, 1995; Lynn & Dixson, 2013; Zamudio et al., 2011). CRT's guiding principles propose that racism is a deeply ingrained, ongoing feature of society and institutions (Bonilla-Silva, 2018). The first CRT principle, the permanence of racism, frames racism as a fundamental part of American civilization, disadvantaging people of colour in all areas of life, including education (Crisp et al., 2024; Ladson-Billings, 2013). In HE, this principle explains structural inequalities wherein institutions may create disparities based on social identity markers, while these disparities are often obscured through colourblindness, meritocracy, and stereotyping (Au, 2013; Edge et al., 2018).

The second CRT principle, whiteness as property, describes how society entrenches rights and privileges associated with whiteness (Harris, 1995). Historically, HE has privileged white students, particularly through curricula centered on Western perspectives, conferring capital benefits to white students (Jenkins & Alfred, 2018; McCoy & Rodricks, 2015; Patton et al.,

2007). Patton et al. (2007) argued that professors exert curricular control based on personal ontological beliefs, disadvantaging students of colour. The current study examined how whiteness as a property construct might influence HE curriculum, affecting the sense of belonging and safety for racialized immigrant and racialized international students. Unarguably, the circumstances described by this principle could be a potential threat to EDI advancements embedded in the inclusive principles of a university because of whiteness as property's entrenched aggression within the educational system, which may hinder institutional initiatives aimed at fostering equity for students from marginalized racial backgrounds (Leonardo, 2013).

CRT's "critique of liberalism" principle challenges dominant ideologies, such as liberalism and meritocracy, that often perpetuate inequalities under the guise of neutrality (Ladson-Billings, 2013). CRT interrogates colourblindness, objectivity, and equal opportunity in education, examining how these ideals can serve the interests of dominant groups, reinforcing their privilege and power (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). In classroom settings, this critique is relevant to assessing whether pedagogical practices genuinely promote inclusivity or reinforce existing biases. For instance, Tarca (2005) highlighted how "colourblindness" can obscure students' cultural differences and experiences, contributing to a classroom climate that may ignore or minimize issues related to race.

Although racial minority groups share common challenges related to race, each group's experiences differ, shaped by unique histories and contexts (Teranishi & Pazich, 2014). This study investigated how racialized immigrant and international students at the intersections of race and gender navigate academic life at UM, focusing on belonging and safety. This context invokes CRT's consideration of intersectionality—a guiding principle examining how racial identity intersects with other social markers to create multifaceted forms of oppression. Collins

and Bilge (2016) articulated six core concepts—inequality, relationality, power, social context, complexity, and social justice—that broaden intersectionality's analytical scope. This study used intersectionality to understand how intersecting identities affect students' experiences of belonging and safety in diverse academic settings, particularly within the "matrix of domination" framework (Collins, 2009, p. 18). This matrix considers intersecting systems of oppression, focusing on structural and institutional power dynamics that may shape students' classroom inclusivity experiences, including teacher–student interactions and cultural assumptions.

CRT, drawing from racialized students' perspectives, scrutinizes the effects of race and racism (Chávez-Moreno, 2024), a crucial issue in education. Among various forms of oppression, racism remains prevalent in educational spaces, reflecting the "Othering" process—an "Us vs. Them" mentality that marginalizes and excludes non-majoritarian students (Powel & Menandian, 2016). This process systematically violates students' dignity by isolating them based on demographic specifics, perpetuating inequality and marginality. This study applied the CRT principle of counter-storytelling, a method that critiques dominant narratives by centering marginalized voices (Matsuda, 1995), to challenge dominant narratives and stereotypes. Martinez (2020) described this principle as questioning widely held beliefs, particularly those endorsed by the majority, and examining underlying power structures and biases. As Solórzano and Yosso (2002) argued, counter-stories "expose, analyze, and challenge the majoritarian stories of racial privilege" (p. 32), using experiential knowledge to counteract the dominant, often exclusionary, discourse (Stanley, 2007). Counter-storytelling prioritizes alternative narratives, addressing "normalized dialogues that perpetuate racial stereotypes" (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004, p. 27). In HE, exclusionary trends may further marginalize counter-knowledge, making counter-stories essential for strengthening CRT's analytical capacity (Ladson-Billings, 2013, p. 11). Counter-

stories provide valuable insights into campus climate and guide research toward genuine inclusivity rather than merely appearing diverse (Keels, 2020). For instance, as discussed in the researcher positionality section, my experiences reflect how racialized students, on different occasions, experience marginalization within a beautiful mosaic of diversity in the educational settings of the university.

The transition for racialized immigrant and racialized international students into new cultural environments is challenging, often creating a sense of "belonging uncertainty" (Walton & Cohen, 2007, p. 82) and threats to their "authentic self" (Kernis & Goldman, 2005, p. 32). Herein, belongingness becomes a key issue in this painstaking process that gives birth to feelings that there are no words to describe. Still, the phenomena of "belonging uncertainty" and "authentic self" can relatively delineate what these students have to undergo. Put briefly, students from the aforementioned identities often perceive their learning institutions as unwelcome; they tend to conclude that "people like me do not belong here" (Walton & Cohen, 2007, p. 83). Kernis and Goldman (2005) described "authentic self" as "the extent to which one's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors reflect one's true or core self . . . [and] the unobstructed operation of one's true or core self in one's daily enterprise" (p. 32). Collectively, the issues brought forward are not unidirectional, so a single tenet of CRT could examine that. However, interest convergence, introduced by Bell (1980), delineates how racialized minority groups are only given a position when they merge with the interests of the dominant group. This conditional acceptance is nothing but emblematic oppression that may wreak havoc on students who see their authentic selves being distorted.

Diversity's value in HE depends on whether it incorporates racial perspectives. Otherwise, racial inequality remains invisible, with "colourblindness" often proving inadequate

for fostering racial equity (Hartmann et al., 2017). Addressing inequality within HE's EDI projects requires examining university leaders' perceptions of diversity and addressing the barriers imposed by various forms of oppression. It is reasonable to hypothesize that "all forms of inequality demand their own specific, well-informed approach" (Buitendijk et al., 2019, p. 36). CRT's tenets of social justice and intersectionality thus ground this study, which investigated how intersecting marginalized identities influence students' experiences of belonging and safety in HE. For example, exclusion within an academic culture may not stem solely from one identity marker but rather from a complex interplay of marginalized identities, often shaped by predominantly white norms (Evans-Winters, 2021). The social justice tenet in CRT promotes an anti-oppressive educational framework that addresses classroom dynamics like safety, empathy, and trauma-informed practices (Adam, 2007). Marginalized students, such as immigrant and refugee groups, often face heightened transitional challenges compared to domestic students (Ferede, 2010). Including international students in this study allowed a comparison of how different groups manage these transitions and receive institutional support.

Validation Theory

In the classroom, encouraging diverse perspectives and recognizing students' abilities necessitate validation to reduce the impact of stereotype threat. Validation theory is instrumental here because of its analytic strength in acknowledging that racialized immigrant and racialized international students face risks to their self-efficacy and that reduced self-efficacy beliefs may lead to self-doubt. This self-doubt drives students to seek validation, which is defined as "an enabling, confirming and supportive process initiated by in- and out-of-class agents that foster academic and interpersonal development" (Rendón, 1994, p. 46). This study operationalized validation theory as a means to address stereotype threat, understood as the fear of confirming

negative stereotypes. The literature indicates that classroom environments that minimize or eliminate stereotype threat can enhance student success, while environments that reinforce stereotypes exacerbate performance gaps beyond what is attributable to academic preparation (Considine et al., 2017). Thus, validation theory was used in this study to assess how students perceived classroom dynamics, particularly in relation to teachers' approaches to stereotypes. Specifically, it evaluated how teachers helped students avoid feeling stigmatized, which in turn supported their aspirations and self-efficacy, thus assisting students in overcoming internalized stereotype threats (Steele, 2010). Successfully fostering such an environment affirms that stereotypes do not define students.

Validation further functions as a process of inclusion and is strongly linked to students' sense of belonging (Hoffman et al., 2002). Factors such as supportive faculty, sympathetic understanding, and perceived classroom support all correlate with this sense of belonging (Hoffman et al., 2002), indicating that validation by faculty—even outside the classroom—can enhance students' sense of belonging. Rendón's (1994) theory of validation posits that students are more likely to succeed in college if they feel empowered and perceive themselves as capable learners, a perception fostered through their academic and interpersonal interactions with institutional agents (Museus & Neville, 2012; Stanton-Salazar, 2010). Validation is demonstrated when faculty and staff recognize, respect, and appreciate students and their backgrounds, and its positive effect on student persistence has been shown particularly for non-traditional students, including those from underrepresented racial or ethnic groups and community college attendees (Barnett, 2011; Rendón, 2002). Rendón (1994) described two forms of validation: academic and interpersonal. Academic validation occurs when faculty help students "trust their innate capacity to learn and to acquire confidence in being a college student" (p. 40). Interpersonal validation

occurs when faculty engage in students' personal growth, assist with social integration into college life, and provide social capital to help students navigate the institution (Museus & Neville, 2012).

A recent qualitative narrative inquiry-based doctoral dissertation (Mendenhall, 2021) explored how gay/queer cisgender men experience validation and invalidation (both academic and interpersonal) on campus, as well as how they manage challenges related to their sexual identity. Rendón's (1994) validation theory served as a central framework to understand how these individuals find the validation needed to overcome difficulties, gain confidence, and thrive in higher education settings. Semi-structured interviews revealed that participants experienced both validation and invalidation from instructors and peers—for instance, validation from a professor affirming queer individuals' intellectual capabilities, invalidation from a professor expressing conservative views, and invalidation from a heterosexual peer dominating class discussion. Unlike the students in Rendón's (1994) original study, most gay/queer cisgender men in this study did not face severe obstacles in college based on their marginalized identity. However, participants expressed that peer validation was still essential for sustaining and enhancing their self-efficacy and self-worth, underscoring the significance of validation theory in fostering retention, persistence, and graduation among this demographic by supporting a sense of belonging. Further research by Kelly et al. (2021) emphasized the role of peer validation, illustrating how peers can function as institutional agents who affirm the experiences of marginalized students. This peer-based validation reinforces students' sense of capability, bolsters self-worth, and acknowledges their prior knowledge, regardless of diverse identities.

Acevedo-Gil et al. (2015) conducted a qualitative study on the experiences of Latina/o students in community college English and math developmental courses, utilizing validation

theory to investigate how institutional agents support Latina/o students' academic success. The study found that institutional agents provide academic validation by emphasizing high expectations, recognizing social identities, and enhancing academic skills. However, participants reported that instructors sometimes undermined their progress through humiliating tactics and deficit-oriented perspectives rooted in high expectations, which damaged students' aspirations, academic confidence, and self-efficacy. Conversely, students in this study were able to sustain their goals through the academic guidance and validation provided by instructors in the form of personalized and caring feedback. This validation restored students' sense of belonging, especially for those who felt alienated from the institution due to previous academic challenges. As a result, students developed resilience and navigated academic demands without compromising their educational aspirations, confidence, or self-efficacy. Together, these studies illustrate the application and efficacy of validation theory in analyzing academic experiences. This study, therefore, employed validation theory to examine how students leveraged their strengths, the strategies they used to navigate barriers, and the facilitators that helped them build a sense of belonging and safety, ultimately fostering a more inclusive classroom environment.

Theory of Students' Integration, Engagement, and Involvement

The notion of diversity is well-documented yet varies in its construction and purposeful meaning. However, the term most frequently used in the literature to capture its essence is "differences"—used to describe differences among individuals across a broad range of perspectives (Cobb & Krownapple, 2019). Rizvi and Walsh (1998) asserted, "Difference is not something that is external to the university; [it is] a resource that students bring to the university" (p. 9). For instance, students arrive with varying degrees of readiness for traditional university study styles, or what Ball et al. (1999, p. 197) referred to as "educational inheritance." They may

approach class activities differently, bring unique perspectives and experiences, ask varied questions, and have differing expectations and concerns. This diversity is essential to EDI discourse. However, it becomes problematic when one considers how students from diverse demographics integrate into a learning community. This issue arises from the fact that being part of a diverse academic community does not necessarily equate to feeling like a true member of it.

In examining this issue, Tinto's (1993) theory of student integration is beneficial, as it suggests that successful academic integration often requires students to sever physical and social ties with their previous communities. Tinto linked a sense of belonging with college integration but did not fully explain why being a true member of a learning community in a host institution is more impactful than simply being considered part of it. In fact, Tinto (1993) later clarified that "the concept of 'membership' is more useful than 'integration' because it implies a greater diversity of [modes of] participation" (p. 106). Additionally, Tinto's concept of integration is associated with a sense of belonging but can become problematic in practice, as it may require students to sacrifice elements of their cultural identity—a phenomenon Tierney (1999) referred to as "cultural suicide" (p. 82), which can lead to distress for international students. Consequently, Yao (2015) argued that efforts to integrate international students through programming may hinder, rather than support, their well-being and academic success. Yao advocated instead for efforts to foster a sense of belonging, which would support international students more effectively. According to Yao, fostering a sense of belonging involves creating an inclusive campus environment where international students feel connected, valued, and supported, without the expectation to assimilate or abandon their cultural identities. This shift from integration to belonging emphasizes mutual respect and the recognition of diverse cultural backgrounds, leading to improved well-being and academic outcomes for international students.

This view emphasizes the need to consider racialized immigrant and international students' academic experiences, particularly regarding their ability to retain their identities while feeling valued in the classroom. Tinto (2017) further explained that engagement is key to belonging, as the more students engage, the stronger their sense of belonging becomes, influencing their self-efficacy, motivation, and persistence—all associated with academic success. For example, a curriculum that incorporates and respects students' perspectives and learning needs can foster engagement and encourage students to persevere in their learning (Reason, 2009). However, the depth of engagement is also critical; it depends on how students interpret their engagement experiences and how this interpretation affects their sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2019a). This study explored these experiences within Tinto's (1993) framework of student integration. Integration of students in pedagogy for diversity is crucial, but the actual classroom experiences, such as offering a choice of expression in assessment design, and their implications must be evaluated. For instance, it must be determined if students are given options for how they wish to demonstrate their learning or if instructors are aware of the barriers to intercultural communication that influence how students from different cultures view receiving feedback.

To develop an inclusive learning environment, it is also crucial to focus on the engagement and involvement of students, the internal stakeholders in this environment (University of Manitoba, 2020). Measuring engagement and involvement at face value may be challenging and fall short of capturing the complete picture needed to meet EDI standards. This argument aligns with campus climate data, suggesting a need for increased EDI awareness and understanding across an institution's community (University of Manitoba, 2020). Student involvement theory (Austin, 1999) underpinned this study by providing a framework to analyze

how students interpreted their experiences, ranging from interactions with diverse faculty, peers, and staff to maintaining membership in various student groups. Similarly, Kuh et al.'s (2005) student engagement theory guided this exploration by emphasizing educationally purposeful activities that illuminate students' experiences in terms of belonging and safety beyond surface-level understanding. For instance, aspects such as academic challenges, active and collaborative learning, enriching educational experiences, and supportive campus climate shape students' engagement and involvement.

Extending beyond these theories, this study incorporated racial, gender, and cultural dimensions to understand better students' lived experiences, particularly those of students of colour, which have been underexplored in previous literature (Dowd et al., 2011). Additionally, this study investigates how students perceived an institution's efforts to create structures, programs, and practices that promote success for students from diverse demographics (Museus, 2014), grounded in EDI initiatives.

Theory of Ecological Systems

The final theory utilized to examine and comprehend the experience of immigrant students was the four-dimensional ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). This idea is based on the individual's position at the center of a sphere of influence that encompasses interactions between family, institutions, policy, and culture across time (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). According to Kim and Diaz (2013), applying this theory to the setting of immigrant students demonstrates that a student's individual life history, social circumstances, history, culture, and time have an impact on their reciprocal connections with their environments. These interactions and the theory's comprehensive approach were crucial in this study for assessing and analyzing how immigrant students perceived the campus

environment and a sense of belonging (Kim & Diaz, 2013). In ecological systems theory, the "microsystem" represents the most direct setting that influences an individual and consists of contacts with family, classmates, school, and the local community, among others (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). For immigrant students, for example, establishing relationships with individuals from similar backgrounds may be very significant in fostering a sense of campus belonging. Ecological systems theory can be used to examine why minority students often require peers or faculty of similar background, rather than peers or faculty from different backgrounds, to build connections that develop their sense of belonging and help them to feel safe (intellectually, emotionally, or even physically). In contrast, this immediate environment may be a negative influence if a student does not feel their immigrant history is valued by other peers or instructors; this setting also illustrates how the same layer can produce either positive or negative interactions or experiences. The "mesosystem" refers to the connections and interactions between pieces of a microsystem (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). This interaction is particularly significant for international and immigrant students, as it reflects the fact that they frequently live between two cultures and must find a balance between them (Chu & Thelamour, 2021). For example, when trying to fit in with new norms and cultures, students often harm their authentic self and erase their ethnic identities in order to fit into the dominant culture (Leung, 2021; Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). This is likely to happen to students who are immigrants and international students, as they are perceived to be outsiders to HEIs. The "exosystem" is distant from the individual and may have settings in which the individual is not directly involved, such as policy-related issues (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). For instance, a neoliberal institutional policy of increasing revenue through heightened international student enrollment may pose challenges to implementing the equitable practices required to address the

diverse needs of a large international student body (Beattie, 2021). The “macrosystem” represents the overarching system encompassing the smaller subsystems and the broader political, historical, and cultural frameworks that shape societal expectations (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). This fourth dimension of the ecological system cannot be utilized for interpreting and theorizing the findings of this study, as this research was not designed to explore students’ experiences and perceptions of sense of belonging, safe spaces, and inclusive pedagogy within a broader societal context beyond the university setting.

Operational Definitions

There are a number of terms used in this study that require definition, as well as an explanation of their specific meaning within the study’s context. The learner population examined in this study consisted of racialized immigrant and racialized international students, an aggregation of diversified students who belong to different races, religions, cultures, and societal strata and who also differ with respect to some other identity markers and characteristics. In this study, these target groups were defined as follows:

Immigrant Student: This study used the term “immigrants” to describe individuals who had landed immigrant or permanent resident status in Canada or who had held this status in the past (first-generation immigrants) as well as to describe individuals whose parents had held such status (second-generation immigrants); individuals in either category who were enrolled in educational institutions were considered “immigrant students.” This study further limited its examination of immigrant students to those who were identified as racialized due to having phenotype and cultural characteristics associated with marginalized racial groups, such as skin tone, accent or manner of speech, name, clothing, diet, beliefs and practices, place of origin, and the like.

International Student: International students were defined as non-Canadian students who did not have "permanent resident" status and had had to obtain the authorization of the Canadian government to enter Canada to pursue an education. In other words, international students were those who had come to Canada expressly to pursue their education. This study only included racialized international students, and individuals were identified as belonging to this category because of their race as marked by skin colour, language, culture, and way of being.

Sense of belonging: "Sense of belonging" is a term that gives birth to many meanings depending on the context in which it is used. By and large, a sense of belonging is a by-product of an individual's subjective and psychological state of mind formulated by interactions in a given context with other human beings. Within the educational context, a sense of belonging helps students understand how they are treated in the academic setting of a new learning institution. A sense of belonging can be diversified in terms of the institution's internal stakeholders (teachers, students, and staff).

This study examines a number of factors (transition, authentic self, belonging uncertainty, stereotype and social identity threat, and the capacity to succeed) associated with a sense of belonging to account for what students perceived and experienced, emphasizing the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality. Prior studies (Smith et al., 2015 Thoman et al., 2014; Walton & Cohen, 2011) have shown that these factors are frequently more pronounced for students from marginalized groups. However, little attention thus far has been paid to racialized immigrant and racialized international students—a significant constituent of a diverse student body in HE. Of importance, this study adds to previous scholarship by looking at sense of belonging in relation to the target population's psychological/cognitive and behavioural/affective dimensions to gain a deeper understanding of these students' development, the conditions that facilitate or hinder this

development, the mechanisms they use to cope with the events amid the state of what they perceive and reality put them into places. Finally, the study extracts insights that can be used for refining EDI efforts (e.g., offering/proposing/establishing a sense of belonging and safety as two key indicators or measures that are imperative for assessing EDI advancement in a HEI) to be implemented affirmatively for the sake of creating inclusive learning communities broadly.

Safe Space: Traditionally, the concept of "safe space" includes three categories: emotional safety, psychological safety, and physical harm/vulnerability. A safe space in educational settings requires maintaining physical safety for all students in terms of both infrastructure and academic setting, so students can experience a learning environment free from violence (Goldstein, 2005). However, this study restricted its investigation of safe space to epistemic and emotional safety; the former refers to promoting epistemic agency, and the latter denotes dignity safety (Harless, 2018).

"Epistemic agency" is the ability of students—in this study, students from marginalized groups—to contribute to knowledge production. Such students are more likely to be vulnerable to threats to their epistemic agency than their dominant-group peers. Epistemic safety involves disrupting classroom norms and dynamics that tend to privilege the epistemic agency of more dominant social identities at the expense of others. Systematic violations to epistemic agency constitute what Dotson (2014) called "epistemic oppression." This often is perpetuated (either intentionally or unconsciously) by socially dominant groups and is also known as "epistemic injustice" (Fricker, 2007).

"Emotional safety" denotes individuals' psychological responses—what and how people feel. For example, emotional safety can take the form of "dignity safety," which concerns anxiety about being ranked as inferior and the worry of being humiliated. There are two forms of

emotional safety: “negative safety from” (from threat, challenge, difference, and the like), and “positive safety to” (to challenge, engage, encounter, and so on). The former form calls for conditions that ensure one’s ability to avoid contact, while the latter calls for conditions that ensure one’s ability to make and sustain contact.

Inclusive Pedagogy: In this current study, inclusive pedagogy is conceptualised as a purposeful and systematic process that extends across curriculum, instructional methods, and assessment. Its aim is to create learning spaces where student diversity is valued, equitable access to educational opportunities is ensured, and all learners are supported to reach their full academic potential (University of British Columbia, n.d.).

The next chapter reviews a wide range of literature pertinent to the topic of inquiry of this study. The intent of this chapter is to present an in-depth discussion of the key focus areas, namely, sense of belonging, safety, inclusive pedagogy, and EDI.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

Part A: Sense of Belonging, Safe Space, and Inclusive Pedagogy

Understanding Sense of Belonging

The sense of belonging within HE pertains to the feeling of acceptance, value, respect, and inclusion within a campus community (Strayhorn, 2019b). It encapsulates students' perceptions of social support, their identification with the institution, and their connection to campus life, which contributes to satisfaction in their interpersonal relationships and group inclusion (Gopalan & Brady, 2020). Notably, belonging does not always require mutual exchange; it can be fostered by a general sense of social acceptance or recognition, which complicates traditional assumptions that belonging inherently relies on reciprocity. This notion is supported by Walton and Brady (2017), who argued that students' sense of belonging is influenced by how they perceive their social identities within a specific campus environment, affecting whether they feel aligned or alienated within that setting. For example, individuals with marginalized identities (such as women in STEM fields; Cheryan et al., 2009) have reported experiencing a lower sense of belonging compared to their peers with dominant identities, who easily connect with the prevailing societal context without facing personal conflicts. A search of the literature shows that sense of belonging has been given little attention, particularly in terms of nuanced layers of identity and their diverse markers (Afonso et al., 2023). This study sought to address this research gap by examining how racialized immigrant and racialized international students navigate their sense of belonging at the intersections of race, gender, and sexual identity within both dominant and non-dominant diverse student bodies.

Belonging in HE is multifaceted and includes key concepts like affiliation, defined as the need for social connection (Leary et al., 2013), and acceptance, which is shaped by perceived appreciation and inclusion from both peers and the institution (Novosel-Lingat, 2020). Moreover, validation underscores the need for respect based on individual contributions rather than conformity to group norms (Novosel-Lingat, 2020). These dimensions underscore that a student's emotional attachment to their university—manifesting as a sense of "fitting in"—is crucial for fostering a supportive environment.

Drawing from Yuval-Davis (2006) and Antonsich (2010), belonging encompasses four core dimensions: affective, spatial, relational, and political. The affective component relates to feelings of familiarity and security within the university environment, often described as a sense of "feeling at home" (Antonsich, 2010). Spatially, belonging can be influenced by one's interaction with physical and digital learning environments, with studies showing that classrooms, as both physical and social spaces, contribute significantly to students' sense of place and comfort (Gravett & Ajjawi, 2021; Thomas, 2016). Relational belonging, centered on social interactions, spans from close friendships to weak academic ties (Antonsich, 2010) and fosters a supportive community within a learning environment through both informal and formal settings (Ahn & Davis, 2020; Motta & Bennett, 2018).

Inclusive learning environments, which integrate opportunities for social interaction, have shown potential in reinforcing students' sense of community, as they can prevent feelings of alienation and support all students' integration (Moriña et al., 2015; Pesonen et al., 2020; Solomon, 2007). However, Yuval-Davis (2006, p. 201) critiqued how "politics of belonging" in academic spaces can perpetuate "us versus them" dynamics, reinforcing a dominant culture that marginalizes those who differ from the norm. Exclusionary discourses within educational

institutions—structured around normative standards—often require marginalized students to assimilate, obscuring diverse identities and limiting the authentic expression of belonging (Nieminen, 2020).

Research on the sense of belonging remains complex and sometimes contradictory. Mahar et al. (2013), in an extensive review, identified five core themes central to belonging: subjectivity (i.e., feeling of being accepted, valued, and fitting in), groundedness (i.e., placing oneself as part of a particular environment or context), reciprocity (i.e., sharing of similar beliefs, interest, experiences), dynamism (i.e., temporary or permanent factors that restrict or influence interactions), and self-determination (i.e., having the choice and control to be part of a particular context or environment). These themes emphasize that belonging is both a personal experience and a dynamic interaction within one's social environment and that it "is built on a foundation of shared experiences, beliefs or personal characteristics" (Mahar et al., 2013, p. 1031). In the university context, a sense of belonging is linked to students' perceived value within the community, which can reinforce their commitment to and affection for the institution (Hausmann et al., 2009; Pittman & Richmond, 2008). Notably, Hausmann et al. (2009) argued that fostering a sense of belonging is not merely beneficial but integral to students' academic success and persistence in higher education. Their study highlighted that students who feel valued and connected are more likely to remain engaged and committed to their studies. These findings underscore the critical importance of belonging in shaping students' university experiences. They suggest that institutions must prioritize inclusive policies and practices that create an environment where all students, particularly those with marginalized identities, feel valued and supported in their academic journeys.

Sense of Belonging in Higher Education

The concept of sense of belonging in HE has been examined with respect to the institutional and interpersonal dynamics that shape students' experiences. Allen et al. (2021) found that a positive campus climate, inclusive peer interactions, and solid faculty-student relationships play central roles in fostering belongingness among students. When students feel socially integrated and perceive that diversity is valued, they are more likely to experience reduced stress and greater access to academic and social resources, enhancing their engagement and resilience within the college environment (Versteeg et al., 2022).

However, the transition into higher education often introduces challenges such as adapting to rigorous curricula, navigating unfamiliar social landscapes, and building independence, which can impede belonging for many students, particularly those from minority backgrounds (Garriott & Nisle, 2018). According to Garriot and Nisle's study, adapting to rigorous curricula, which demand advanced academic skills and time management, often creates significant stress for students unfamiliar with such demands. In addition, navigating unfamiliar social landscapes requires students to form new peer relationships and adapt to diverse social norms, which can be particularly daunting for those from underrepresented or marginalized communities. Building independence adds another layer of complexity, as students must manage responsibilities such as financial self-sufficiency, decision-making, and balancing academic and personal life. In addition to these challenges, Tinto (2017) asserted that a sense of belonging is critical for outcomes like retention, persistence, and overall academic success, making it a priority for institutions striving to support diverse student populations. Yet, as Parker (2021) highlights, existing research has often centered on race and ethnicity, calling for expanded

investigations into how belonging varies for other student demographics, including racialized and international students.

The literature points to belonging as a construct tied to perceived social support and connectedness on campus, where students feel "accepted, respected, valued, and important" (Strayhorn, 2019a, p. 3). This experience is both a relational and emotional one, tied to inclusivity and mutual respect within the campus environment (Strayhorn, 2019a). Parker (2021) argued for a holistic understanding of belonging that emphasizes students' well-being in settings actively engaged in EDI initiatives. Recognizing the significance of EDI, Parker noted that research should address racialized immigrant and international students who face unique intersectional challenges related to race, gender, and sexuality in order to understand the impact of their collegiate experiences on sense of belonging. These students' experiences of belonging in classroom contexts remain understudied, representing a key gap in the literature.

Further, Museus and Chang (2021) argued that, for racialized minority students, belonging is deeply influenced by the campus climate, especially in environments where racial and ethnic discrimination, social isolation, or cultural dissonance may be prevalent. Such factors can undermine belonging and lead to cultural mismatch with institutional norms, ultimately hindering students' academic integration and emotional well-being. Understanding these variances in how students from diverse backgrounds experience campus climate is essential for enhancing EDI practices, which seek to create equitable and supportive educational environments that cater to the holistic needs of all students.

While a sense of belonging is widely recognized as essential for academic success and well-being, significant research gaps remain, particularly regarding how racialized and international students navigate belonging within their unique social and academic intersections.

This understanding can inform institutions' EDI efforts, enabling them to refine practices that foster inclusive and supportive campus climates.

Factors and Benefits Associated with Sense of Belonging in Education

A sense of belonging in higher education is shaped by numerous interpersonal and institutional factors, especially among marginalized groups. Cooper (2009) identified the importance of isolating specific factors that contribute to sense of belonging, as this knowledge can improve support for diverse student populations. Yao (2015) demonstrated that peer interactions and interpersonal relationships are essential to belonging, while Maramba and Museus (2013) found that cross-cultural interactions and ethnic group cohesion play a significant role for Filipino American students. Belonging is further reinforced when students feel they "fit in" and matter to the institution (van Gijn-Grosvenor & Huisman, 2020). Notably, research has shown that a supportive campus climate is especially important for students of colour, as they face unique barriers to inclusion (Locks et al., 2008; Strayhorn, 2019b). A supportive campus climate, as defined by Locks et al. (2008), involves institutional practices, peer interactions, and faculty engagement that foster students' sense of belonging and inclusion while addressing systemic barriers and promoting cultural diversity to ensure students feel valued and supported. Strayhorn (2019) emphasized the importance of social support, meaningful relationships, and cross-cultural engagement in creating such an environment, particularly for students of colour. This climate helps mitigate exclusion and inequities, enhancing academic performance, psychological well-being, and persistence in higher education.

In addition to general factors, recent studies emphasize the critical impact of microaggressions, language barriers, and experiences of marginalization on belonging. Microaggressions, subtle forms of discrimination, are particularly detrimental, as they create an

atmosphere of exclusion for racialized students (Morrison et al., 2023). Morrison et al. (2023) suggested that, when racialized students who speak English as an additional language interact with native English-speaking students, such interactions may manifest as assumptions about a student's intelligence or capabilities based on their accent or proficiency in the dominant language, leading to feelings of exclusion and diminished self-esteem. The authors also highlighted that these microaggressions contribute to an environment where racialized students feel marginalized, exacerbating challenges to their sense of belonging (Morrison et al., 2023). Language barriers can significantly impede international students' sense of belonging, often leading to feelings of isolation and misunderstanding (Glass et al., 2016). This phenomenon aligns with the cultural discontinuity hypothesis, which posits that disparities between a student's home culture and the dominant culture within educational settings can result in misinterpretations and challenges in communication (Tyler et al., 2008). Such cultural discontinuities may exacerbate misunderstandings, as international students navigate differing cultural norms and expectations, potentially leading to social isolation and academic disengagement. For instance, van Gijn-Grosvenor and Huisman (2020) highlighted that international students frequently report feelings of exclusion due to language and cultural misunderstandings, leading to loneliness and hindering academic engagement. This interplay between cultural discontinuity and misunderstanding underscores the importance of culturally responsive support systems within educational institutions to facilitate better integration and support for international students.

A pervasive issue affecting minoritized students' belonging is the dominance of mainstream norms, which often marginalize non-dominant identities. Vaccaro and Newman (2016) argued that belonging has been historically treated as a universal construct, but students

from minoritized backgrounds interpret and experience belonging differently than their privileged peers. For instance, while white students may align more easily with institutional values, racialized students often report feeling marginalized and uncertain about their place in predominantly white institutions, facing what has been termed “belonging uncertainty” (Cohen & Garcia, 2008; Walton & Cohen, 2007). This issue is compounded by the expectation that minoritized students assimilate to dominant cultural norms, leading to feelings of alienation and a reduced sense of belonging (Museus et al., 2018).

Socioeconomic status also significantly influences students’ sense of belonging. Working-class students often experience a disconnect with the values and norms of higher education institutions, which tend to reflect middle- and upper-class norms (Fernández et al., 2023). Furthermore, the intersectionality of race, gender, socioeconomic status, and sexuality compounds these challenges, as shown by Vaccaro and Newman (2016). They advocated for an intersectional approach in EDI policies to address the layered experiences of belonging among diverse students.

The impact of institutional support is another critical factor. Institutional support can buffer against the negative effects of marginalization and promote a more inclusive climate. Ruzek et al. (2016) found that visible teacher support within the classroom positively influences students’ sense of belonging by creating an environment that fosters validation and respect. Such institutional efforts can mitigate the impact of exclusionary experiences and foster a supportive academic environment that benefits all students. Strayhorn (2019b) underscored that, for Black male students, participation in campus organizations and supportive peer networks are instrumental in helping them navigate and acclimate to campus life.

The consequences of a lack of belonging are profound, impacting both retention and well-being. Research has shown that students from minority groups, including 2SLGBTQIA+ and part-time students, often report lower belonging, which correlates with higher dropout rates (Stout & Wright, 2016). Additionally, a lack of belonging is associated with mental health challenges, including loneliness, depression, and increased healthcare visits, especially for those experiencing compounded challenges, such as language barriers and microaggressions (Freire & Hurd, 2023; Sarsar et al., 2023).

Conversely, when students experience a strong sense of belonging, they demonstrate greater academic motivation, higher engagement, and improved self-efficacy, which in turn contributes to better academic outcomes (Pedler et al., 2022; Zumbrunn et al., 2014). For immigrant and refugee students, a positive sense of belonging not only enhances educational outcomes but also promotes personal self-respect and future employment prospects (Elkord, 2017; Neufeld et al., 2016). These benefits underscore the importance of fostering an inclusive and supportive campus climate that prioritizes diverse identities.

Despite growing research on campus climate, studies have often overlooked the classroom as a central context for fostering belonging. Museus et al. (2018) argued that understanding the specific features of educational settings that contribute to belonging is essential, particularly since classrooms are the primary environments where students engage academically. Further investigation into classroom dynamics could yield actionable insights for enhancing belonging, particularly among minoritized students who may face unique challenges in these settings.

Sense of Belonging in the Context of the Extant Study

A sense of belonging in higher education is profoundly influenced by contextual cues that students interpret based on their identities and experiences (Healey & Stroman, 2021). These interpretations are often shaped by institutional biases, including racist, sexist, and classist narratives that reinforce existing power structures and hinder the inclusivity of campus environments. According to Healey and Stroman, ambiguous cues—such as receiving critical feedback—can trigger "belonging uncertainty" in minoritized students, particularly when these cues echo broader social biases. Walton and Brady (2017) explained that individuals from marginalized backgrounds are more sensitive to these subtle signals, which can reinforce feelings of exclusion. For example, West (2024) highlighted the complexities LGBTQ+ international students face when navigating different identity markers in predominantly white educational settings. Her report also underscored how queer international students may struggle to find belonging in 2SLGBTQIA+ spaces that are often dominated by whiteness. This circumstance is an example of a phenomenon known as "stereotype threat," which arises when students fear confirming negative stereotypes about their group, leading to stress and diminished cognitive focus on academic tasks (Spencer et al., 2016, p. 416).

The threat of stereotyping is particularly harmful in academic settings, where students' performance may be evaluated within contexts dominated by prevailing stereotypes. For instance, female students in STEM courses may internalize critical feedback as validation of a stereotype about women's purported lack of competence in mathematics, thus experiencing social identity threat. This heightened alertness toward perceived threats disrupts minoritized students' focus on academic tasks, creating cognitive and emotional barriers to full engagement (Immordino-Yang et al., 2019). Such barriers hinder these students' academic experiences,

undermining their overall sense of belonging and confidence in their abilities (Walton & Brady, 2017).

Creating supportive environments for belonging requires intentional efforts by educational institutions to acknowledge and affirm students' diverse identities. Healey and Stroman (2021) argued that students must feel their identities are recognized and valued to cultivate a meaningful sense of inclusion. Gray (2017) further emphasized that students should not be compelled to conform or hide parts of their identity in order to integrate into campus environments. Instead, environments that celebrate diversity and promote students' self-expression foster a more robust sense of belonging. To reinforce this, Mendoza-Denton et al. (2017) advocated for targeted feedback aligned with high expectations and support, which bolsters students' self-esteem and fosters confidence in their potential. When feedback is provided with the intention of helping students grow—rather than solely critiquing their performance—it can serve as a critical tool in supporting their sense of belonging and motivation (Dweck & Yeager, 2019).

The importance of being authentic within academic relationships was underscored by Vaccaro and Newman (2016), who found that, while both privileged and minoritized students perceive belonging as "fitting in," only minoritized students emphasized the need for safety and respect as components of belonging. For marginalized groups, the campus environment is often perceived as judgmental, limiting their ability to be their "authentic selves." Such inauthenticity can hinder the formation of deep, meaningful relationships, which Vaccaro and Newman (2016) identified as essential to a true sense of belonging. They observed that privileged students tend to find belonging through familiar, task-oriented relationships, while minoritized students desire relationships rooted in genuine self-expression and mutual respect.

Stereotype threat and the pressure to suppress core aspects of one's identity have a particularly profound impact on students from racialized backgrounds, member of the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, and those with disabilities, who may struggle to establish authentic connections in spaces dominated by majority norms (Ryan & Deci, 2017; Zepke, 2013). For instance, these students frequently experience relational compromises, such as maintaining surface-level connections or concealing parts of their identity to avoid further marginalization. The pursuit of belonging thus becomes a balancing act, where students strive to remain true to themselves while navigating environments that may not fully accept or understand their experiences (Vaccaro & Newman, 2016).

The ability to be authentic in academic and social interactions directly influences the degree to which students feel they belong. Kahu and Nelson (2018) argued that learning environments must go beyond merely accommodating diverse students to actively engage them in creating an inclusive space where all perspectives are valued. For students from marginalized groups, the opportunity to engage authentically within academic settings is not just desirable but essential for genuine integration into the campus community. This approach not only enhances individual well-being but also contributes to a more cohesive and supportive campus culture overall.

Stereotype threat, particularly in terms of race, poses significant barriers to the sense of belonging for racialized immigrant and international students, who often contend with the added weight of implicit biases and perceived cultural mismatches within higher education contexts. As Walton and Brady (2017) emphasized, stereotype threat activates when students worry about confirming negative racial stereotypes, such as assumptions regarding academic capabilities or language proficiency, which can lead to heightened stress and disengagement. Racialized

immigrant and international students may also experience belonging uncertainty, a condition where doubts about acceptance within the institution persist due to racial and cultural disparities (Spencer et al., 2016). Such stressors disrupt cognitive performance, as students divert energy toward managing identity-based concerns rather than academic tasks. For immigrant students, in particular, navigating these threats while integrating into unfamiliar educational systems often requires resilience amid reduced institutional support structures that recognize their unique experiences. Consequently, stereotype threat not only undermines academic outcomes but also erodes these students' connection to the academic community, underscoring the need for environments that actively counteract racial bias to support genuine belonging (Kahu & Nelson, 2018).

Understanding Safe Space

The concept of "safe space" in HE is complex, often sparking debate regarding its purpose, function, and implications. While some critics have argued that safe spaces might act as a filter, shielding students from uncomfortable or opposing ideas (Magistro IV, 2019), proponents have defined them as environments that encourage open expression and dialogue around challenging topics, including diversity, oppression, and cultural competence (Cook-Sather, 2016; Patton, 2019). Grieve (2016) asserted that a safe space is "a place where students with different ideas can isolate themselves from those who would disagree with them" (p. 3). Macpherson (2021) described safe spaces as "negotiated" settings, established through collectively agreed-upon ground rules that promote risk-taking and growth by creating a supportive environment for dialogue. The scholars cited above who have addressed the concept of safe space have placed an onus on researchers whose work encompasses safe space in education to clarify in their future studies how this notion can be implemented. Therefore, this

section of the literature review begins by outlining how I operationalize safe space in my research, then discusses its context within various literatures, its significance to my study, and the prominent debates surrounding this topic in education—particularly in higher education contexts concerned with EDI—as well as the potential gap this existing study aims to address.

The concept's relevance has grown in various HE contexts, including classrooms, movement-building, and student support services. As Ali (2017) argued, safe spaces were intended to amplify the visibility and safety of marginalized groups, though their exact origins remain unclear. Scholars have traced the term back to multiple sources. Harris (2015) and Kenney (2001) highlighted its historical significance in LGBTQ+ activism, where the term has been used to describe physical and social spaces for marginalized communities to gather without fear of discrimination. Meanwhile, Bell (2015) attributed the term's emergence to corporate America and the work of the social psychologist Kurt Lewin, who used it to describe environments that facilitate open dialogue and behavioral change. These varying perspectives suggest that the concept has developed through different sociopolitical movements, adapting to the evolving needs of marginalized groups in educational and activist settings.

From an educational perspective, Arao and Clemens (2013) cautioned that equating safe spaces with comfort can dilute their purpose, especially in educational settings, where discomfort can foster critical engagement. They argued that such spaces must not eliminate all tension but rather support authentic exchange across power divides, such as those between dominant and minority groups. This approach highlights a potential gap in the literature around how safe spaces can be structured to balance protection with the intellectual rigor needed to address issues of privilege, power, and oppression.

The educational debate around safe spaces has also addressed their role in epistemic justice—promoting knowledge generation that challenges oppressive structures. Anderson (2021) advocated for safe spaces as a mechanism to counter epistemic oppression, empowering underrepresented groups by validating situated knowledge and fostering the free exchange of ideas. In this light, safe spaces are seen not merely as areas of emotional refuge but as foundations for equitable knowledge production that respects marginalized perspectives, facilitating marginalized groups' active participation in the academic community.

In addition to supporting knowledge exchange, safe spaces have been widely acknowledged to be crucial for the psychological and emotional well-being of marginalized individuals. By providing protection from judgment, trauma, and the burden of justifying one's identity, safe spaces help prevent psychological harm and emotional exhaustion for those from marginalized backgrounds (Leung et al., 2022). This understanding underscores the need for carefully designed safe spaces in HE that balance emotional protection with opportunities for meaningful, sometimes challenging, discourse. Anderson (2021) further emphasized that these spaces support individuals in expressing their gender identity or sexuality without fear, allowing them a sanctuary from hostile scrutiny and affirming their experiences in environments that often impose pressures to conform.

Conceptualizing and Mobilizing Safe Space in the Existing Study

My study restricted the investigation of safe space to epistemic and emotional safety. Epistemic safety promotes marginalized students' epistemic agency, while emotional safety ensures dignity and respect (Harless, 2018). Epistemic safety involves creating spaces where marginalized students can freely contribute to knowledge production without facing impediments that privilege dominant groups' perspectives (Anderson, 2021). Dotson (2014) referred to the

systemic barriers limiting marginalized students' epistemic contributions as "epistemic oppression" (p. 116). In this context, Bailey's (2014) concept of an "unlevel knowing field" (p. 62) illustrates how dominant social groups often hold an epistemic advantage, which leads marginalized students to adapt to a curriculum that typically reflects Western or majority perspectives, thus reinforcing epistemic injustice (Bailey, 2014; Brunette-Debassige et al., 2022; Zembylas, 2018). As a result, the dominant group receives validation of its perceived superiority, while subordinate groups come to view the dominant academic culture and epistemology as standard and adapt to it (Zembylas, 2018).

Epistemically safe spaces counteract this imbalance by fostering an environment where marginalized perspectives are acknowledged and integrated. For example, Garvey et al. (2018) highlighted that 2SLGBTQIA+ students often find their viewpoints suppressed within curricula, limiting their ability to relate personally to course material. In such settings, professors who either ignore or express personal biases against non-normative identities (such as homosexuality) or neglect to address the problem when it is appropriate may not fully provide a supportive environment for epistemic engagement (Nicolazzo, 2021). Disrupting classroom norms that reinforce dominant epistemic agency is essential to building a space that protects marginalized students from oppressive norms and practices (Anderson, 2021; Boler, 2014; Callan, 2016).

This study examines factors that either facilitated or inhibited racialized minority students' experience of safe spaces, while also exploring the value of what Collins (2002) called "subordinated knowledge" (p. 252). Such knowledge, embedded in marginalized communities' lived experiences, can enrich global education and benefit all students. Filomeno and Brown (2022) argued that immigrant students bring valuable global competencies to campuses due to their experience navigating diverse cultural contexts. Ma (2018) suggested that, rather than

expecting adaptation solely from international students, universities should foster mutual learning between domestic and international students, enhancing collective epistemic growth.

Epistemic safe spaces that actively integrate subordinated knowledge empower marginalized students, providing alternative perspectives that counter dominant epistemologies. Anderson (2021) outlined criteria for these spaces: they promote marginalized students' epistemic agency, counter epistemic power imbalances, engage with anti-oppressive knowledge frameworks (e.g., feminist, anti-racist, queer theories), and protect against epistemic injustices, including phenomena like "gaslighting." Kohli and Solorzano (2012) discussed gaslighting as a tactic where instances of racism are denied or turned against racialized groups, which furthers psychological strain for these student bodies (Martin, 2018).

Creating epistemically safe spaces often involves pre-emptive measures to protect against psychological harm, similar to offering trigger warnings in discussions on sensitive topics such as sexual violence, which might retraumatize survivors (Pratt et al., 2025). In a study on the epistemological conception of safe spaces, Anderson (2021) argued that providing emotional safety strengthens students' epistemic agency, allowing them to engage fully without fear of psychological harm. In inclusive, intersectionally aware classrooms, marginalized students, such as female students of colour, feel more comfortable expressing their perspectives, knowing their experiences are respected and integral to the learning environment (Anderson, 2021).

Creating Safe Space: A Conundrum

The creation of safe spaces in educational settings aims to shield students from discomfort, fostering an environment where all individuals feel secure to express their ideas and share perspectives. Lukianoff and Haidt (2015), however, critiqued the safe space movement, suggesting that it overemphasizes emotional protections, inadvertently stifling the educational

process by excessively limiting expression. According to Golding (2000), balancing this comfort with necessary boundaries around expression presents a challenge for institutions seeking to maintain a truly safe yet intellectually rigorous learning environment. As a result, students may feel more at ease articulating personal experiences, but critical issues that could be uncomfortable to discuss may be left unexamined. This approach risks compromising students' overall well-being and intellectual growth, as the technical complexities involved—such as the absence of clear Canadian legal guidelines on academic freedom (Thieme, 2024)—render it difficult to construct safe spaces that address diverse needs comprehensively and effectively.

The social–political challenges within educational institutions further complicate the creation of genuinely inclusive safe spaces. These institutions are often shaped by structures that harbor pervasive issues such as homophobia, Islamophobia, ableism, xenophobia, and racism, which are deeply embedded within educational environments (Bailey, 2016; Khosrojerdi, 2015; Mackenzie & Kwong, 2016; Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014; Prats et al., 2017). Such embedded biases challenge the creation of spaces that can universally accommodate all marginalized identities, as Anderson (2021) pointed out, making it particularly difficult to establish spaces that genuinely support the diverse needs of students across intersecting identities. This constraint has led to the development of safe spaces specifically designed for particular social identities, such as spaces dedicated to students of colour, 2SLGBTQIA+ students, and female students, to better address these groups' unique needs.

Creating safe spaces that effectively meet the needs of all marginalized students necessitates heightened sensitivity to various concerns and the ability to address these challenges preemptively. Anderson (2021) raised a critical question: "How can we expect to guard against every form of epistemic harm given the complexities involved in diverse classroom settings?" (p.

288). This conundrum highlights the difficulty of providing a universally safe environment while promoting resilience in navigating epistemic challenges—an area that my study aims to explore further. Palfrey (2017) suggested that safe spaces can be feasible if norms and processes are implemented to protect against exclusion. However, he contrasted safe spaces with "brave spaces," as conceptualized by Arao and Clemens (2013, p. 138), where the primary objective is not comfort but the pursuit of truth, even if it means confronting uncomfortable realities. Brave spaces encourage open discourse and challenge students to engage deeply with diverse viewpoints. Although Palfrey (2017) supported integrating safe spaces into academic life, he implied that, unlike brave spaces, their focus is not inherently on the search for truth—an observation that invites further examination of how best to balance safety and intellectual inquiry in educational settings.

Classroom as a Safer Space: Practicing Epistemic and Emotional Safety

According to Callan (2016), creating safe spaces in classrooms involves identifying specific threats to students' emotional and epistemic safety. Emotional safety, as Harless (2018) described, is tied to individuals' psychological experiences in a social environment, where breaches of safety occur when individuals feel threatened or frightened. Callan (2016) framed this as "dignity safety," wherein participants are free from reasonable concerns of being humiliated or regarded as socially inferior (p. 67). Harless (2018) further explained that dignity safety requires trust in being treated with fairness and respect, particularly significant for marginalized students who may carry vulnerabilities stemming from historical stereotypes and prior emotional harm. Minor rejections or signs of exclusion in classrooms, even when unintended, can accumulate into a persistent pattern of microaggressions that gradually degrade emotional safety (Callan, 2016; Sue, 2010). Harless (2018) suggested that these subtle but

consistent biases make it difficult to pinpoint specific instances of harm, yet they collectively generate significant concerns for students from underrepresented backgrounds regarding how they are perceived and treated.

Epistemic safety, as Anderson (2021) argued, aims to protect marginalized students' epistemic agency by fostering an environment where their contributions are recognized and valued in knowledge production. Epistemic oppression occurs when marginalized voices are silenced, diminishing the learning community's overall capacity to engage in meaningful dialogue. Anderson (2021) asserted that epistemically safe spaces benefit all students, facilitating knowledge exchange that respects diverse perspectives. Yet, as Flenser and Von der Lippe (2019) highlighted, safe space pedagogy faces criticism for potentially avoiding difficult topics, limiting the depth of engagement necessary for critical thinking. Boostrom (1998) supported this critique by asserting that classrooms should expose students to diverse perspectives and manage conflicts constructively, as avoiding conflict can stifle intellectual autonomy and critical engagement.

Barrett (2010) contended that guaranteeing complete safety is unrealistic, especially for vulnerable students. Instead, she advocated for "classroom civility," focusing on behavior expectations rather than psychological comfort (p. 10). Piquemal et al. (2021) added that civility is particularly essential in addressing identity-based incivility, where factors like gender, race, and Indigeneity influence students' sense of safety. By maintaining civility standards, classrooms may address incivility without the unrealistic expectation of absolute emotional protection. Callan (2016) further distinguished between dignity safety, which ensures respectful treatment, and intellectual safety, which could undermine the goal of education if it overly protects students from discomfort. For quality education, Callan argued that it is necessary to create an environment that challenges students intellectually while still respecting their dignity, an

especially critical balance for marginalized students who may already face barriers to sustaining their dignity due to systemic inequities.

Healey and Stroman (2021) observed that classroom content and pedagogy can either affirm or marginalize students, often reflecting biased perspectives that favor dominant cultural norms. When materials appear to validate or reinforce discriminatory views, marginalized students may feel their emotional safety is compromised, interpreting the classroom environment as threatening. Callan (2016) warned that intellectual safety—whereby students expect their beliefs to be preserved—may hinder necessary intellectual challenges. Harless (2018) proposed that classrooms should encourage intellectual discomfort to facilitate growth while also maintaining dignity safety. Differentiating between humility and humiliation helps students face difficult ideas without feeling degraded (Callan, 2016).

Effective learning requires both "negative safety from" harm and "positive safety to" engage with new, potentially challenging ideas (Harless, 2018, p. 335). Negative safety allows students to opt out of certain interactions, while positive safety fosters openness to diverse perspectives. Harless (2018) emphasized that learning inherently involves "challenge, disequilibrium, or contact with the new" (p. 335), fostering a deeper understanding through engagement. In supportive environments, students are more likely to share errors openly or seek constructive feedback, enhancing the quality of their learning experience (Soares & Lopes, 2020). Nevertheless, students expect some level of protection to facilitate their engagement.

Schapiro (2016) underscored the value of safe spaces, suggesting that comfort enables students to engage with challenging learning experiences. However, prioritizing free debate may inadvertently compromise safety for marginalized students, as mainstream responses may unintentionally alienate them. In the context of international LGBTQ+ teachers, Mizzi et al.

(2021) described this precarious balance as “belongingscapes,” where belonging is seen as temporary and context-dependent, with teachers remaining aware that their sense of inclusion can change. To address this, institutions should implement cultural competency training, ground rules, and a code of conduct to help create a safer, inclusive space that supports all students, especially those from marginalized backgrounds.

Inclusive Pedagogy: Positioning, Conceptualizing, and Understanding Prior Literature

Inclusive pedagogy has become an essential consideration in HE as institutions respond to the increasingly diverse demographic landscape of university classrooms. Defined as an intentional and systematic teaching–learning process, inclusive pedagogy involves curriculum, course design, teaching practices, and assessment strategies that collectively strive to create a learning environment where all students feel respected, have equitable access to learning opportunities, and are supported in reaching their full potential (Centre for Teaching, Learning and Technology [CTLT], n.d.). Notably, scholars have argued that inclusive pedagogy goes beyond mere adaptation of materials or methods; it emphasizes a holistic approach, integrating EDI principles to foster a sense of belonging, safety, and validation among students (Stentiford & Koutsouris, 2021).

Current research, however, has yet to fully clarify the conceptualization and operationalization of inclusive pedagogy within HE contexts. Specifically, few studies have provided a comprehensive mapping of how “inclusion” is conceptualized or the practices by which it is achieved in university settings (Stentiford & Koutsouris, 2021). As a result, there remains a gap in understanding precisely how an “inclusive” HE system should be designed, what groups should be considered in its formation, and what exclusionary practices should be identified and dismantled (Armstrong et al., 2010). In response, this study investigates students’

experiences with inclusive pedagogy in diverse classroom settings, emphasizing students' roles as active participants in curriculum implementation, course design, instructional approaches, and assessment strategies.

Historically, the concept of inclusive pedagogy has evolved from the principles of inclusive education, which originally focused on ensuring equitable access for students with disabilities (UNESCO, 2006). Over time, the scope of inclusion has broadened to encompass fostering a diverse and supportive learning environment for all students without discrimination. Research has indicated that inclusive pedagogy should focus on removing barriers, not only for students with disabilities but for all learners, through a teaching approach that adapts to diverse student characteristics and needs (Livingston-Galloway & Robinson-Neal, 2021). Florian (2014) contended that inclusive pedagogy entails instructional methods that create a community-oriented classroom atmosphere where every student feels they belong. Georgetown University further emphasized inclusive pedagogy as a collaborative approach between students and instructors, promoting social justice and active participation in an equitable learning space (Georgetown University Center for New Designs in Learning & Scholarship, n.d.). This approach to inclusive pedagogy assumes that students enter the classroom as contributors to the learning process and not only as recipients; this reflects the benefits of diversity, which fundamentally works by bringing different perspectives to the university, leading to knowledge contributions and truth persuasion (Cameron, 2014).

In its focus on student difference, the inclusive pedagogy literature has investigated different facets of student identity, including disabilities (Enjelvin, 2009; Lombardi et al., 2013) and students who have the resultant outcomes because they are members of one or two marginalized groups (Aragón et al., 2017; Schmid et al., 2016), which is one of the aims the

study addresses. The literature has revealed a holistic understanding of inclusive pedagogies, and studies on inclusion in terms of "student diversity" have investigated instructors' perceptions of widening participation, diversity, and effective pedagogical strategies in HE (Cunningham, 2013). The literature on inclusive pedagogy has largely focused on identifying obstacles to its effective implementation. Studies have reported challenges such as lack of time, insufficient pedagogical training, and heavy teaching workloads, particularly in STEM fields, which can inhibit educators from adopting inclusive practices (Duncan et al., 2023). Furthermore, attitudinal barriers, such as a lack of inclusive perspectives among faculty, have also been noted as significant hindrances. Developing an inclusive mindset among educators is complex, as it involves changing deeply held beliefs about student capability and diversity, which is a critical component of inclusive pedagogy (Gale & Mills, 2013; Rouse, 2017). Yet, fostering a positive and inclusive mindset is crucial, as research has underscored the importance of supportive teacher attitudes in promoting effective inclusion (Tiwari et al., 2015; Van Houtte & Demanet, 2016).

In advancing inclusive pedagogy, scholars like Florian and Beaton (2018) have emphasized designing pedagogical frameworks that proactively consider the diverse needs of all students. Rather than making reactive adjustments to meet individual needs, they have advocated for a universal design approach to learning, which ensures that course materials and teaching methods are accessible from the outset (Lawrie et al., 2017; Ok et al., 2017). This proactive approach aligns with the dimensions of inclusive pedagogy that stress both the adaptability of teaching methods and the creation of an equitable learning environment (Gale & Mills, 2013). Through universal learning design, inclusive pedagogy seeks to reduce the need for later

modifications, creating a foundation where all students' educational needs are anticipated and accommodated.

Situating Inclusion in Inclusive Pedagogy in the Higher Education Context

In examining inclusive pedagogy within HE, Stentiford and Koutsouris (2021) observed that many existing frameworks lean toward procedural approaches to inclusion rather than theoretical ones. This procedural focus emphasizes practical strategies by which educators foster inclusivity and a sense of belonging among all students. For instance, Hockings et al. (2012) highlighted teaching practices such as providing resources in accessible online formats, enabling safe peer interactions, and selecting curriculum content with cultural sensitivity. Moore et al. (2010) similarly advocated for inclusive practices like using diversity icebreakers, introducing international foods, and employing popular culture references (e.g., film clips) to encourage cultural competency and comfort within the classroom. These approaches underscore inclusion as both a pedagogical and cultural imperative, emphasizing methods that validate students' diverse identities while promoting equity.

Schmid et al. (2016) extended this approach, suggesting inclusive pedagogy should involve diverse content and literature, create opportunities for students to share their cultural perspectives, and enhance student–faculty interaction. This aligns with Florian and Spratt's (2013) framework, which distinguishes between common and individualized needs—highlighting that inclusive pedagogy must consider needs universal to all students, those specific to sub-groups, and those unique to individuals (Lewis & Norwich, 2004). Stentiford and Koutsouris (2021) further developed this model, categorizing approaches into two contrasting stances on difference: the "general differences" position, which addresses needs common to all (such as the need for guidance on learning strategies), and the "individual differences" stance,

which focuses on the distinct needs of specific groups, like 2SLGBTQIA+ students or those for whom English is not a first language. This approach underscores the imperative of viewing these diverse needs without stigma, advocating that diverse characteristics should not be seen as deficits but as integral components of an inclusive classroom.

This perspective of "inclusion as making a difference invisible" (Stentiford & Koutsouris, 2021, p. 2255) found support in Dallas et al. (2016), who argued that minimizing the need for specific accommodations can reduce the stigma often associated with disability support. The conceptualization of inclusion in HE has also evolved to align with broader principles of equity and social justice, yet it remains a "wicked problem," as HE institutions are often faced with conflicting pressures and discourses (Hockings, 2010; Larsen & Emmett, 2022; Weuffen et al., 2022). These conflicting discourses underscore the challenges of implementing a universal approach to inclusion, as political, social, and institutional factors frequently influence how inclusivity is pursued and maintained within HE.

In response to these complexities, Gibson (2015) critiqued the limitations of the rights-based discourse surrounding disability in HE, asserting that a purely rights-based approach fails to fully address the nuanced experiences of diverse student identities. This critique emphasizes the importance of capturing a wide array of student narratives to better understand inclusion. As such, the present study expands on the focus of previous literature by examining two minority groups—racialized immigrant and racialized international students—while considering intersecting social identities such as race, gender, and sexual orientation. Grier-Reed and Williams-Wengerd (2018) emphasized that an intersectional framework is essential for fostering truly inclusive pedagogy, a call that aligns with Hurtado et al. (2012), who stressed the need for

further research into how multiple social identities shape unique experiences in inclusive settings.

Despite the focus on EDI in many HE classrooms, the current literature suggests that promoting inclusive pedagogies in HE remains more of a performative metric than a transformative tool. As Stentiford and Koutsouris (2021) pointed out, institutional leaders may highlight EDI as evidence of their commitment to inclusivity without fully dismantling longstanding exclusions faced by marginalized groups (Slee, 2019). This gap suggests that for inclusive pedagogy to achieve its full potential, HE must go beyond superficial displays of inclusivity, fostering environments where all students' voices genuinely inform pedagogy and policy (Canning, 2017; Dare & Nowicki, 2018). Thus, this study aims to explore how students experience inclusion in classrooms where their voices and intersectional perspectives actively shape their sense of belonging and ensure safe space while implementing inclusive pedagogy in order to foster equitable and transformative learning environments.

Creating Inclusive Classrooms: Pedagogical Approaches to Diversity and Equity in Higher Education

The increasing diversity in higher education (HE) due to universal participation and expanded access (Clarke & Nelson, 2014) has led universities to implement inclusive pedagogical strategies that support student success across backgrounds and preparation levels (Devlin & McKay, 2017; Gale & Parker, 2014). HE stakeholders widely agree that inclusive learning is essential (Doscher & Landorf, 2018), leading students and educators to advocate for the inclusion of race, culture, justice, and equality in curricula to foster fairer and more equitable learning experiences (Livingston-Galloway & Robinson-Neal, 2021). Such advocacy underscores the need to recognize campuses as microcosms of broader societies with persisting

inequalities and to address these inequalities through inclusive pedagogy (Romsa et al., 2019). Inclusive pedagogies, therefore, have been introduced as effective approaches for educators to respond to the rising diversity in classrooms, helping them accommodate the complex social and cultural needs of a heterogeneous student body (Gravett et al., 2020). HE institutions must realize that cultivating an inclusive campus requires classrooms that embody the principles of inclusive excellence.

Implementing inclusive pedagogy requires shifting traditional teaching approaches to embrace diversity and multiple identities. Validation theory, as proposed by Rendón (1994), highlights the importance of supporting non-traditional and first-generation students, who often experience isolation and self-doubt in the academic setting. Rendón emphasized that validation from instructors and peers is essential to counteract stereotype threat, the fear of confirming negative stereotypes, which Steele (2010) identified as a significant factor in disparate academic outcomes. Teachers who convey high standards, reinforce students' non-stereotypical identities, and provide materials that reflect students' backgrounds can mitigate stereotype threat and promote a sense of belonging (Steele, 2010). This approach also involves teachers' seeing students as active partners, validating their experiences, and using diverse resources to reflect students' varied cultural and social backgrounds (Hurtado et al., 2012). Dolinsky (2012), for example, highlighted the potential of sharing personal identities, such as being openly 2SLGBTQIA+, to normalize difference and foster understanding and awareness of the identities of those who are marginalized. As Linder et al. (2015) noted, students emphasize authenticity as crucial to inclusive learning environments; they feel more comfortable sharing their own identities and experiences when instructors genuinely discuss inclusivity issues.

The challenges of facilitating complex conversations on race, religion, sexuality, class, and culture in a diverse classroom are well-documented. Several scholars have underscored the significance of managing these discussions thoughtfully, as they can prompt both connection and conflict (Armitage, 2011; Cabrera, 2018; hooks, 2014). For example, the majority of students may experience identity threat when discussions on race arise, fearing that engaging in such discussions could lead them to be perceived as racist, which often hinders interaction with minority peers (Steele, 2010). Kendi (2020) and Bonilla-Silva (2018) observed that many white students avoid race discussions, while others, as DiAngelo (2018) argued, may expect commendation for minimal self-reflection on their racial identities. Failing to engage white students in these discussions risks reinforcing superficial understandings of race while placing an undue educational burden on students of colour, who may feel obligated to lead discussions on racial issues (Linder et al., 2015).

A key aspect of inclusive pedagogy is designing curricula that reflect the diversity of student identities. Studies have suggested that international and Black and minority ethnic (BME) students perform better in courses that represent their cultures and provide relatable content (Chitpin, 2021; Parker-Shandal, 2023). Gorski and Pothini (2018) argued that diversity in curriculum content counters the predominantly Eurocentric focus of HE, fostering inclusivity by integrating perspectives from beyond traditional frameworks (Banks, 2016). Yet, creating inclusive curricula for 2SLGBTQIA+ students in HE remains challenging (Snapp et al., 2015), as research has shown they rarely see affirming representations and often encounter stereotypes (Mehrotra et al, 2023; Raja et al., 2023). Kosciw et al. (2015) emphasized that the absence of positive representations perpetuates deficit views of 2SLGBTQ+ identities, while Ahmed's (2019) concept of "queer use" involves repurposing objects and spaces beyond their intended

functions, challenging conventional norms and fostering genuine inclusivity by reimagining institutional practices to accommodate historically marginalized individuals. Additionally, there remains a significant research gap regarding resilience, positive coping mechanisms, and achievements among sexual minority students, highlighting a need for studies that celebrate 2SLGBTQIA+ identities rather than focus solely on adversity (Kosciw et al., 2015). Jaekel (2017) further emphasized the importance of empowering students to critically examine cultural power dynamics in order to challenge dominant narratives and promote an inclusive, transformative educational experience. This aligns with McGregor and Park's (2019) advocacy for progressive pedagogy as a means of fostering critical thinking that enables students to recognize and contest societal power structures.

Group work, often promoted as an inclusive practice, requires careful implementation to avoid reinforcing exclusion. Mizzi and Star's (2019) study suggested that group work facilitates peer support and mitigates feelings of isolation by creating relational bonds that contribute to a more inclusive educational experience. Additionally, the collaborative nature of group-based activities encourages dialogue, enabling queer students to challenge dominant perspectives while forming meaningful connections with peers. In another instance, Madriaga et al. (2010) found that students with and without disabilities often experience similar challenges with group dynamics, while Kimmel and Volet (2012) noted that grouping students from diverse backgrounds does not automatically foster tolerance or collaboration. Hockings et al. (2012) argued that merely assembling diverse groups without addressing underlying assumptions and biases fails to create genuine inclusion. For group work to be effective, students must understand the purpose of collaboration, feel valued in the learning process, and trust in the equitable dynamics of their groups.

Creating inclusive classrooms requires educators to integrate pedagogical approaches that address diversity, validate student identities, and foster meaningful interactions across differences. Despite growing interest in inclusive practices, a need for further exploration remains, particularly regarding the intersectional experiences of marginalized groups and the integration of progressive pedagogies that reveal power dynamics in HE (Jaekel, 2017; Kosciw et al., 2015). By embedding these principles, HE can advance toward truly equitable and transformative learning environments that accommodate and empower all students, challenging longstanding educational inequities.

Part B: Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI)

Introduction

The prioritization of EDI in HE has grown markedly over recent decades, driven by increasingly diverse student populations that HEIs have struggled to accommodate (Eaton & Christensen, 2023; Siri et al., 2022). To address these challenges, many HEIs have adopted EDI as a central institutional goal, though such policies are often critiqued as performative rather than substantive (Hoffman & Mitchell, 2016). Confusion over the meanings of "diversity" and "inclusion" has further complicated these efforts, frequently leading to tokenistic and outdated approaches that lack actionable change (Cardemil, 2018; Grewal, 2021; Mugo & Puplampu, 2022). Grewal contended that terms such as "representation," "equality," "equity," "diversity," and "inclusivity" are often used synonymously, which dilutes critical examination of systemic inequities (para. 7). The societal impulse to categorize individuals as "We" or "Other" underscores this issue, particularly as certain groups maintain cultural hegemony, reinforcing these inequities within academic institutions (Gertz, 2018).

This binary effect, which separates “We” from “Other,” creates an adverse environment that devalues some groups’ right to equity and inclusion, as seen in debates surrounding racism, feminism, sexism, and ableism within academia (Gertz, 2018). According to Gertz, establishing diversity and inclusion as core democratic values is essential for sustaining human dignity, and this imperative requires all societal institutions, including universities, to genuinely support EDI initiatives (p. 5). HEIs are tasked with translating these commitments into tangible practices that foster environments where diverse cultural identities are acknowledged and upheld within a framework of mutual respect and safety, supported by legal instruments and institutional policies (Gertz, 2018).

A recent example of the complexities within EDI initiatives occurred when University of Chicago Dean Jay Ellison (2020) sent a letter to students denouncing “trigger warnings” and intellectual “safe spaces.” This stance, aimed at promoting intellectual rigor, was met with mixed reactions and criticism for its approach to student safety and inclusivity (Wilkinson, 2017). Such tensions highlight the challenges faced by Canadian HEIs, which must respond to increasingly diverse student demographics, including Aboriginal students, Black students, 2SLGBTQIA+ students, and students with disabilities, while balancing free expression with human rights (Cox & Strange, 2016; Drazenovich & Mazur, 2022). As these student groups often encounter persistent social and educational barriers, critics have argued that Canadian universities prioritize diversity over free speech, complicating the discourse on human rights and inclusivity in HEIs (Macdonald, 2018; Piquemal et al., 2021; Thieme, 2024; Turk, 2018).

While there has been significant discourse around EDI in Canadian HE, limited attention has been given to the experiences of racialized immigrant and racialized international students, particularly concerning their sense of belonging and psychological safety (García et al., 2019;

Leask, 2015; Lewis et al., 2019; Museus et al., 2016). These students' experiences are further complicated by intersecting identities, such as gender and sexuality (Gopaldas, 2013). Gertz (2018) emphasized that universities can play a crucial role in creating "civilized spaces" where learning, dialogue, and inclusive living are valued, thereby modeling diversity and inclusion for broader society (p. 5).

What is EDI in the Education System?

EDI within educational institutions is complex and multifaceted, varying significantly across theoretical and practical applications (Tavares, 2021). Diversity, according to Tamtik and Guenter (2019), spans various social dimensions such as race, gender, age, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and disability, with additional considerations for religion, education, and family status. While it historically focused on racial and ethnic diversity, the term "diversity" remains ambiguous, with Hurtado et al. (2008) noting uncertainty around whether it refers to demographic representation, campus climate, curricular content, or other aspects. This ambiguity impacts efforts to integrate inclusive pedagogy, which aims to incorporate materials that reflect a range of cultural, racial, and ethnic backgrounds to deepen representation in academic content. Similarly, recent expansions of diversity in higher education have included religious and political diversity, though these broadened definitions introduce additional challenges (Mayhew et al., 2014; Navarro et al., 2009).

Inclusion, meanwhile, aims to integrate, empower, and amplify diverse voices within all facets of institutional life (Smith, 2014). Garcia et al. (2021) distinguished between equity and equality, pointing out that while equality may prioritize the visibility of diverse groups as a measure of success, equity involves deeper structural changes to dismantle the barriers that systematically exclude marginalized individuals. For inclusion to be meaningful, it must not only

recognize but also value diversity, shifting power from those granting voice to those who speak, particularly to marginalized groups affected by discrimination and bias (Grindstaff, 2022; Hill, 2009; Scott, 2020). In line with these principles, EDI efforts address these systemic inequalities within higher education, yet debates persist on whether they effectively address the real experiences of marginalized students (Kundu et al., 2020).

Marginalized students often face psychological impacts from exclusionary dynamics within academic environments, and research has highlighted how such dynamics erode their sense of belonging, self-esteem, control, and meaningful existence (Matheson et al., 2019; Williams & Carter-Sowell, 2009). In particular, Matheson et al. (2019) argued that these exclusionary practices can lead to feelings of alienation and disconnection, particularly when students perceive a lack of acknowledgment or inclusion in academic and social spaces. The erosion of these critical aspects not only diminishes students' engagement but also affects their ability to participate and thrive within the university community fully. Graduate students, in particular, face unique forms of marginalization, though their experiences have received comparatively limited research attention (Harper & Quaye, 2015). These impacts underscore the importance of meaningful EDI frameworks to support student survival and success in HE, which include institutional mechanisms for identifying and addressing cultural and systemic barriers (Wolbring & Lillywhite, 2022).

In Canada, the Tri-Agency funding agencies[1] provide specific definitions that guide EDI in educational settings. For example, equity entails removing systemic barriers and biases to

[1] The Tri-Agency funding agencies—comprising the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR), the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council (NSERC), and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC)—set national guidelines for EDI in academic and research institutions. These agencies establish funding policies that require universities and research institutions to implement EDI principles in their programs, hiring practices, and student support initiatives.

ensure equal access; diversity includes various characteristics such as race, immigrant status, gender identity, and ability; and inclusion refers to practices that value individuals' contributions and provide equal support (Wolbring & Lillywhite, 2022). This structured approach supports the progression and success of diverse learning communities by encouraging institutions to foster an environment conducive to full, dignified participation for all students.

Diversity

Diversity in HE extends beyond race, gender, culture, and socioeconomic background to include differences in language, pedagogy, curriculum, and student identities, fostering critical thinking, communication, and problem-solving skills essential for student success (Sanger, 2020b). Collaborative activities in multicultural classrooms help students recognize and appreciate diversity, view peers as valuable resources, and broaden their perspectives (Caruana, 2011; Wahed & Pitterson, 2021). Effective teaching in diverse contexts thus requires anticipating and integrating students' varied backgrounds into pedagogy and course design.

Scholars have categorized diversity in HE into three types: structural diversity (the demographic composition of the student body), informal interactional diversity (the quality of social interactions across diverse groups on campus), and classroom diversity (learning experiences that expose students to different perspectives within academic settings) (Garces & Jayakumar, 2014; Hurtado et al., 2012). Structural diversity provides opportunities for peer interaction that can foster positive outcomes, though studies have shown mixed results in linking it to cognitive or curricular benefits (Bottia et al., 2021; Karacsony, 2022; Lee et al., 2024). Meanwhile, informal interactional and classroom diversity focus on interactions that support cognitive and social development, particularly among racially and ethnically diverse students (Hartwell et al., 2017; Hurtado et al., 2015; Pascarella et al., 2014).

Page (2019) conceptualized diversity in two dimensions: cognitive diversity, which relates to varied problem-solving approaches and information processing, and identity diversity, which includes markers such as race, gender, sexual orientation, and religion. Cognitive diversity emphasizes diverse problem-solving skills, while identity diversity, though often viewed as numeric representation, risks reducing students to symbolic objects or commodities when used superficially for institutional inclusion metrics (Cobb & Krownapple, 2019). This superficial approach can undermine equity efforts, commodifying marginalized groups without fully valuing their contributions (Sanger, 2020b).

Identity is central to diversity discourse in educational settings, as it intersects with institutional culture, creating blended student experiences that may obscure aspects of identity in favor of dominant norms (Smith, 2015). For example, non-dominant students may feel pressured to align with prevailing cultural norms, such as modes of dress or expression, to achieve success, which creates tension between institutional diversity goals and individual identity (Smith, 2015). This alignment with dominant norms can render certain identities, such as sexual orientation, invisible, leading to perceptions of exclusion and creating barriers for marginalized groups. Similarly, racialized identities and those associated with immigrant or international students often correlate with experiences of exclusion, discrimination, and limited access to resources and privileges, challenging the efficacy of diversity initiatives in genuinely addressing these inequities (Smith, 2015). Consequently, efforts to achieve meaningful diversity require institutional transformation to address the deep-rooted issues of marginalization faced by diverse student populations.

Equity

Equity in educational institutions is fundamentally about ensuring fair treatment, access, opportunity, and advancement for all members of the academic community, with a focus on identifying and dismantling barriers that impede marginalized groups' full participation (University of Manitoba, 2020). However, achieving equity in education is challenging, as inequities are deeply embedded within educational structures and practices. These inequities disproportionately impact minoritized and marginalized students, sustaining gaps in opportunity and outcomes that disadvantage certain groups (Artiles, 2011; Mills & Ballantyne, 2016).

The persistence of inequity in education reflects broader societal structures of oppression, such as historical and systemic racism, which continue to shape schooling experiences and reinforce privilege among dominant groups (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Educational inequities are perpetuated through assumptions and biases inherent in teaching, assessment practices, and institutional management, which often privilege certain cultural norms and values over others (Hurford & Read, 2022). These structures maintain disparities not only in access to resources but also in the quality of learning experiences available to students from different backgrounds (Windschitl et al., 2018).

Efforts to foster equity in education require transformative approaches that go beyond providing access alone. Such efforts must interrogate who receives access to high-quality educational experiences and must ensure that all students can engage in challenging intellectual work and feel valued within the learning community. Windschitl et al. (2018) emphasized that high-quality education should allow students to engage with complex ideas, participate meaningfully in discipline-specific activities, and be recognized as integral members of the educational environment. Equity-focused approaches must aim to disrupt traditional structures

that reproduce disparities, advocating instead for inclusive practices that elevate the experiences and voices of marginalized students.

Recent scholarship further has supported the importance of institutional accountability in addressing equity, suggesting that schools and universities should adopt reflective practices that identify systemic barriers within their policies and curricula. For instance, work by Paris and Alim (2017) suggested that equity in education should be culturally sustaining, embracing diverse linguistic and cultural practices rather than forcing conformity to dominant norms. These scholars advocated for educational spaces that validate and integrate students' cultural identities, providing them with opportunities to succeed without erasing their unique backgrounds.

Inclusion

As demand for higher education increases, institutions face ongoing challenges in creating environments that support the diverse needs of students. Inclusivity has become a core focus, as transforming educational spaces into inclusive environments is essential to meet the needs of an increasingly diverse student body (Sengupta et al., 2019). Inclusion in HE goes beyond academic debates, emphasizing the need to provide students with a supportive environment that reflects the diversity of society. This approach calls for policies, programs, and practices tailored to each institution's unique context (Sengupta et al., 2019; Shore et al., 2011).

Inclusion entails more than merely allowing diverse individuals to participate; it involves fostering a sense of belonging, fairness, respect, acceptance, and open communication within campus communities (Sengupta et al., 2019; Tamtik & Balasubramaniam, 2024). Creating an inclusive campus starts by ensuring accessibility, safety, and social integration, which are supported by key factors such as physical space, organizational structure, and campus culture (Strange & Benning, 2015; Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). For instance, inclusive campuses offer

accessible spaces and foster respectful interactions, benefiting all students, particularly those from underrepresented groups who might otherwise struggle to navigate campus environments due to factors like mobility challenges or non-binary identities. Strange and Benning (2015) noted that such barriers jeopardize students' sense of belonging, underscoring the need for institutions to remove physical and social obstacles to promote inclusion.

The integration of inclusivity into institutional mission statements is essential for building a positive campus climate that supports diverse identities (Sengupta et al., 2019). Scholars have highlighted several foundational principles of inclusion: fostering cross-group understanding, encouraging interactions among diverse groups, recognizing shared values, and valuing the unique contributions of each community member (Museus et al., 2016). These principles facilitate a shift from exclusionary practices to integrative learning communities that engage differences constructively, a shift that can be particularly valuable for minoritized students (Nasir & Vakil, 2017).

Inclusion also relies on cultivating a sense of mattering, whereby students feel recognized and valued within their community. Schlossberg's (1989) concept of "mattering" remains relevant, encompassing the feeling of being noticed, valued, and appreciated. Mattering and validation, as described by Rendon (1994), are foundational in mitigating the precarious experiences of marginalized students, fostering an educational culture that values diversity and belonging (Dean, 2023). Recent studies have affirmed that mattering and validation are crucial for engagement, especially for students from marginalized backgrounds who often face exclusionary practices within academic environments (Juvonen et al., 2019; Rattan et al., 2012). By fostering a sense of mattering, institutions promote student engagement, academic success, and a sense of belonging that is foundational to inclusive learning environments.

The Complex Realities of EDI in Higher Education

The positive effects of student diversity on learning outcomes and overall campus climate in HE are well-documented, with diverse perspectives contributing to enriched educational experiences for all students (Bowman, 2013; Hurtado et al., 2012). However, there is increasing debate about the extent to which universities are obligated to create environments that truly support EDI in meaningful ways, rather than through minimal engagement strategies (Drazenovich & Mazur, 2022). While many institutions display visually diverse images on their websites as a form of virtual diversity, this often serves as an external projection rather than a reflection of internal institutional values or student experiences (Pippert et al., 2013; Saichaie & Morphew, 2014). Critics have argued that this performative approach—relying on surface-level representations rather than genuine cultural transformation—can hinder institutional progress in achieving true inclusivity, perpetuating instead "jargon-laden diversity statements" that fail to challenge existing power structures (Harris et al., 2015, p. 33). Rankin et al. (2022) warned that such superficial strategies "can not only stall but even reverse progress toward equity" (p. 3).

A core critique of the current EDI frameworks in HE is their tendency to overlook students' psychological needs, especially their sense of belonging, which is essential for creating genuinely inclusive environments (Fernández et al., 2023). A strong sense of belonging is associated with better student engagement, motivation, and academic success, particularly for underrepresented groups (Strayhorn, 2019a). Yet, despite increased diversity on many campuses, minority students often report feeling marginalized or excluded, facing obstacles that negatively impact their educational and career trajectories (Rutledge & Gnilka, 2022). This experience is especially true for students who are subject to racial discrimination and isolation from peers, which undermines their sense of belonging on campus (Lipson et al., 2018).

Inclusive pedagogy has emerged as a critical component in addressing these gaps. Unlike traditional teaching methods, inclusive pedagogy consciously integrates diverse perspectives, creating learning environments that validate and respect all identities (Sanger, 2020a). By designing curricula that reflect a range of cultural experiences and knowledge systems, educators can foster a more inclusive and supportive atmosphere that directly contributes to a stronger sense of belonging for marginalized students (Wahed & Pitterson, 2021). Inclusive teaching approaches, such as culturally responsive teaching, actively engage students from diverse backgrounds, helping them see themselves reflected in the curriculum and encouraging participation. However, implementing inclusive pedagogy requires institutional support, including professional development for educators who may lack the tools or knowledge to create such learning environments (Burdge et al., 2013).

Some scholars have argued that overly progressive EDI policies, such as safe spaces, trigger warnings, and personal pronoun recognition, may detract from higher education's mission of intellectual rigor and resilience-building (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018; Paresky, 2018). Critics like Campbell and Manning (2018) have suggested that such policies risk "coddling" students, which may weaken their ability to navigate challenging situations and erode resilience. This perspective contends that an overemphasis on EDI could lead to a form of "infantilization," potentially undermining students' development of grit and resilience—qualities essential for academic and personal success (Robbins, 2016). To me, while critics have argued that progressive EDI policies may "coddle" students, an alternative view is that creating inclusive learning environments does not equate to lowering academic standards but rather enhances student engagement and participation. Research has shown that when students feel a sense of belonging and psychological safety, they are more willing to take intellectual risks, engage in

critical discussions, and persist through academic challenges (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Strange & Banning, 2015). Additionally, resilience is not merely about enduring discomfort but about developing the tools to navigate complex social and intellectual landscapes effectively. Thus, rather than weakening resilience, well-implemented EDI initiatives can empower students by equipping them with skills to engage in diverse and challenging academic conversations while fostering a sense of inclusion that supports their overall well-being and success. Supporting this argument, research by Strayhorn (2019a) and others underscored that fostering a strong sense of belonging does not equate to "coddling" but rather creates a foundation of support that empowers students to engage more fully and confidently with challenging material.

Despite the efforts to increase campus diversity, minority and marginalized students still encounter significant barriers. For example, female students in STEM fields frequently face biases and low expectations from educators and advisors, reinforcing harmful stereotypes and limiting their academic potential (Flores et al., 2024). Furthermore, 2SLGBTQIA+ students often experience heterosexism and genderism, which significantly impact their physical and mental health (Jaekel, 2017). Meyer (2010) pointed out that many educators avoid discussions of sexuality in classrooms, exacerbating LGBTQ+ students' sense of exclusion. Without institutional support for 2SLGBTQIA+ inclusive curricula and training for educators, these students may continue to feel alienated in academic spaces, as shown by Burdge et al. (2013).

Another pervasive challenge to inclusion is stereotype threat, particularly in fields like STEM, where stereotypes about gender and racial differences can lead to performance anxiety among underrepresented students. Research has indicated that stereotype threat can impair academic performance, as students fear confirming negative stereotypes about their groups (Omair, 2019; Spencer et al., 2016). The psychological impact of stereotype threat is profound,

often resulting in disengagement and reduced academic performance among stigmatized students. This phenomenon highlights the importance of fostering an inclusive campus climate where all students receive the support needed to counteract these detrimental effects.

Racialized immigrant and racialized international students in HE often face unique challenges related to racism, discrimination, and microaggressions, which complicate their ability to fully integrate into campus environments that claim to prioritize EDI (Garcia et al., 2021). Unlike domestic students, racialized immigrant and international students must navigate cultural, linguistic, and systemic barriers that can exacerbate feelings of alienation and marginalization (Museus et al., 2016). Research has shown that these students frequently encounter overt discrimination and subtle microaggressions, such as being stereotyped based on their ethnicity, nationality, or language proficiency, which can impair their academic engagement and sense of belonging (Cho & Yu, 2015). For example, some students report being treated as perpetual foreigners, are often questioned about their ability to adapt, or are assumed to lack academic capability, a perception that undermines their confidence and hinders their ability to thrive in academic settings (Gomes, 2015).

Microaggressions, in particular, are pervasive, as racialized immigrant and racialized international students often experience subtle dismissals or biases, such as comments that highlight their “accent” or question their cultural practices, leading to a dichotomy between race and language (Kubota et al., 2023). These microaggressions reinforce a sense of “otherness” and often pressure students to conform to dominant norms, which can lead to psychological distress and reduced academic performance (Houshmand et al., 2014). The cumulative effect of these experiences may create a hostile campus climate where racialized international students feel unsupported, despite the institution’s outward commitment to diversity (Garcia et al., 2021).

Addressing these issues requires universities to go beyond symbolic gestures, implementing structural and cultural changes that challenge ingrained biases and provide support systems that affirm racialized students' identities and lived experiences within the academic community.

EDI from a Canadian Perspective

Canadian universities, much like other prominent institutions across Canada, are increasingly urged to prioritize EDI to respond to the unique needs of diverse groups, including women, 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals, Indigenous populations, racialized minorities, and people with disabilities. Tamtik and Guenter (2019) identified two primary institutional responses: education to raise awareness and policy to instigate behavioral reform. While educational programs often focus on preventing discrimination by fostering understanding of implicit bias, institutional policies are designed to create immediate structural changes. As seen in a 2022 Universities Canada survey, many institutions now employ a two-pronged approach to EDI: preventing discrimination through awareness and providing resources for responding to incidents when they occur (Universities Canada, 2023).

The positive outcomes of these efforts are evident across Canadian post-secondary institutions. Tamtik and Guenter (2019) highlighted that institutionalized EDI frameworks have led to increased representation and support for underrepresented groups, including targeted scholarships, outreach programs, and the creation of new equity offices. Additionally, as institutions embrace EDI, students from diverse backgrounds report experiencing greater belonging and academic support, which is essential for their retention and success (Tamtik & Guenter, 2019). As these policies become more embedded within the university infrastructure, they promote a more inclusive campus culture, encouraging marginalized groups to see themselves as valued academic community members (Tamtik & Balasubramaniam, 2024).

However, significant challenges remain. As Malinda Smith, Professor of Political Science and President of the Academic Women's Association at the University of Alberta (see Edge et al., 2018) argued, diversity is often narrowly construed, focusing on gender equity while underemphasizing racial and intersectional diversity. This approach risks "diversifying whiteness" rather than fostering true multicultural inclusion. Similarly, Wendy Cukier, Professor of Information Technology Management at the Ted Rogers School of Management and Director of the Diversity Institute at Ryerson University, contended that diversity initiatives are often relegated to human resources, limiting their reach and effectiveness in transforming core academic practices, such as curriculum development and student services (see Edge et al., 2018). This "siloed" approach can hinder the broader integration of EDI values across the institution and limit their impact on overall campus culture.

Luginaah shared his insights based on his experiences as a Ph.D. student at McMaster University and a professor at Western University (see Kidd et al., 2020). He highlighted that not all diverse environments are truly welcoming; many individuals have been included in discussions but not actively engaged. Luginaah pointed out both anecdotal and systemic challenges within Canadian institutions and proposed strategies for Western to intentionally foster a culture of genuine belonging. He believed that EDI is essential for cultivating an environment where everyone can thrive, feel valued, and have their voices heard. In such settings, individuals can achieve their full potential while aligning their values with those of the organization. Despite Canada's varied population, systemic barriers and implicit biases continue to hinder the integration of different groups and individuals. Although many Canadian institutions have prioritized EDI in their policies, Luginaah candidly acknowledged that these often passive and superficial commitments still leave considerable room for improvement.

Further, Cox and Strange's (2016) argument about framing diversity as a resource rather than a problem underscores the potential for EDI to enrich the educational environment. By viewing diversity as a driver of intellectual and cultural growth, universities can move beyond superficial commitments to fostering meaningful, positive interactions that benefit all students (McGrath, 2010). However, Tamtik and Guenter (2019) cautioned that vague and inconsistent policy language across institutions can diminish the practical impact of EDI initiatives. Without precise definitions and coherent strategies, EDI risks becoming a performative exercise rather than a transformative movement toward equity.

Although efforts in EDI within Canadian HE have resulted in notable advancements, such as improved representation and support services, challenges persist in ensuring that these initiatives bring about systemic and lasting change. It is crucial to articulate policies more clearly, foster genuine inclusivity, and thoroughly integrate EDI values into institutional practices to achieve the full potential of these efforts.

Chapter Three

Methodology

While Chapter 1 introduced the scope and purpose of this research and Chapter 2 summarized significant scholarly literature, this chapter lays out the methodological practices used to address the key research questions that guided the investigation and led to the data collection and interpretation of findings. These questions were the backbone of my study, providing a clear direction and purpose. This chapter details the methodological approach and design of this study, including the overall approach and step-by-step methodology, followed by methodological limitations and ethical considerations. This section restates the research questions as follows:

1. What are racialized immigrant and racialized international students' perceptions and experiences of belonging, safe space, and inclusive pedagogy in HE?
2. What are the factors that either hinder or promote their sense of belonging and experience of safe space and inclusive pedagogy, and what strategies have they developed in responses to these specific experiences?
3. What can we learn from those students' experiences to help refine EDI approaches and practices?

Research Paradigm/Philosophical Assumption

This study utilized a qualitative system of inquiry to explore racialized immigrant and racialized international students' perceptions and experiences of belongingness, safe space, and inclusive pedagogy in HE, with special attention to the intersection of race with additional social identity (gender and sexual orientation) in the classroom setting. Using words, artifacts, observations, or photographs as data analysis points, qualitative investigations provide insight

into how individuals experience and interpret their natural environment (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Mertens, 2015; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). In keeping with the scope and means of data analysis of qualitative investigation, this study interviewed participants to collect narratives of their' lived experiences of the phenomenon under investigation. This research was situated in the philosophical worldviews of constructivism or social constructivism (sometimes paired with interpretivism), which is a paradigm for qualitative research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The constructivist paradigm states that the nature of knowledge and reality is intersubjective and socially produced through an individual's lived experiences, with many subjective worldviews constituting an intrinsic component of the socially constituted reality (Creswell, 2007; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Mertens, 2015). Creswell and Creswell (2018) explained this paradigm in the following way:

> Social constructivists believe that individuals seek an understanding of the world in which they live and work. Individuals develop subjective meaning of their experiences—meaning directed toward certain objects or things. These meanings are varied and multiple, leading the researcher to look for the complexity of views rather than narrowing meanings into a few categories or ideas. The goal of the research is to rely as much as possible on the participants' views of the situation being studied. (p. 8)

A phenomenological methodology is applied to inquiry based on the social constructivist philosophy. Phenomenology seeks to achieve a greater knowledge of how humans relate to and make sense of phenomena in their everyday lives (Vagle, 2018). Therefore, a phenomenological approach was most appropriate for this research, as it was intended to investigate how the target group of this study (racialized immigrant and racialized international students) makes meaning of their perceptions and lived experiences of the complex phenomena of sense of belonging, safety,

and inclusive pedagogy. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), phenomenology offers a comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon as multiple individuals experience it. The authors explained that "phenomenology requires at least some understanding of the broader philosophical assumptions, and researchers should identify these assumptions in their studies" (p. 169). As a branch of qualitative research and a mode of philosophical inquiry, phenomenology seeks to describe the phenomenon in question with as much richness of detail as possible, with the unique goal of describing the "essences" of the phenomenon that contribute to an understanding of its significance (Husserl, 1964; Van Manen, 1990).

Research Design/Methodology

A research design is a strategy or blueprint that objectively connects the data to be collected and the conclusions to be reached to the study's initial questions (Yin, 2009). It outlines the actions to be taken from "here" (i.e., research questions) to "there" (i.e., conclusions reached from the study); these processes include appropriate data collection and analysis. This ensures that the acquired data can adequately address the study questions (Yin, 2009). Qualitative research is considered a culturally relevant strategy since it emphasizes dialogue with participants and places a premium on their own experiences and perceptions (Nodelman, 2013). For this study, qualitative research was essential because it could offer occasionally overlooked perspectives (Hammersly, 2000) regarding the voices of marginalized students.

This study employed a qualitative, phenomenological case study approach to data collection and analysis. By combining the phenomenological approach with the case study method, I attempted to comprehend complex experiences and diverse perceptions of a sense of belonging, safety, and inclusive pedagogy from a perspective where race intersects with gender and sexual orientation. Case studies are "intensive analyses and descriptions of a single unit or

system bounded by space and time" (Hancock & Algozzine, 2006, p. 11) or "in-depth, field-based studies of particular instances of the phenomenon" (Gall et al., 1999, p. 289). The single unit in this study was the racialized student body at one Western Canadian research university, namely the University of Manitoba in Canada (space) in 2023 (time). Case studies are "anchored in real-life situations," and they result in "…a rich and holistic account" of a particular phenomenon (Merriam, 2009, p. 51). This study focused on the 'real-life situation" of racialized immigrant and international students and how their intersecting identity markers (race, gender, and sexuality) affected how they made sense of the phenomenon—sense of belonging, safety, and inclusive pedagogy—from their own perspectives. Each student's subjective interpretation of the topic of inquiry became a distinctive and different case, which is one of the most important benefits of case study, particularly in relation to this research proposal (Stake, 1999). Yin (2009) defined a case study as "an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (p. 23). This definition is appropriate for the context of this study because it was unknown to what extent the phenomenon being studied would be subjectively described. This was the exploratory starting point for this study.

Phenomenology varies from many qualitative approaches in that it focuses on the collective understandings of groups and makes no assertions about the participants as individuals. It does not aim to assert that participants hold certain conceptions but rather collects data to highlight the spectrum of conceptions prevalent in the population under investigation. Instead of focusing on the causes of events, phenomenology aims to describe how phenomena are perceived in the everyday world by those who are influenced by them (Vagle, 2018). Consequently, interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) extends a simple phenomenological

description by providing insights into how a given person in a given context makes sense of the particular phenomenon (Larkin et al., 2006); in this case, IPA captured the perceptions and experiences of racialized immigrant and international students. IPA is devoted to the rigorous investigation of individual experience (Tomkins, 2017). It seeks to comprehend lived experiences and to investigate how individuals make sense of their personal and social contexts; the meanings participants attach to particular experiences are seen as their "primary currency" (Smith & Osborn, 2003). Through the two complementary IPA principles of "giving voice" and "creating meaning," researchers seek an "insider perspective" of human experiences. IPA is based on and influenced by three positions: phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography (Smith et al., 2022, p. 81). As explained above, *phenomenology* concentrates on generating and articulating the essence of an individual's experiences but does not seek to evaluate such descriptions (Creswell, 2013). Phenomenologists seek to discover meaning, and by focusing on the participants' streams of consciousness—their thoughts, emotions, and memories—they attempt to get access to their inner lives. In fact, phenomenology is devoted to eliciting individuals' firsthand experiences by enabling respondents to tell their own stories on their own terms; participants are regarded as experiential experts. IPA makes an "explicit commitment to person-in-environment and not merely phenomenon-as-experienced" (Quest, 2014, p. 43); researchers must focus on the context-dependent life worlds of participants, contingent on social, historical, and cultural elements (Eatough & Smith, 2008). As a result, IPA is not 'simply descriptive"; the researcher is expected to provide an interpretive account of what it means for respondents to have such experiences within their specific setting (Noon, 2017). *Hermeneutics* is a style of interpretation that investigates the role of language, questioning, and human dialogue in attempting to comprehend a particular phenomenon (Smith et al., 2022). IPA acknowledges

that analysis always entails interpretation and is strongly tied to hermeneutics in recognizing the centrality of the researcher to analysis and research (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). To obtain an "insider perspective" of experience, IPA requires a twofold hermeneutic: "the participant is attempting to make sense of their personal and social world, and the researcher is attempting to make sense of the participant attempting to make sense of their personal and social world" (Smith, 2004, p. 40). In the context of this study, both hermeneutics are essential to going deeper into the making of the meaning of the phenomena from an individual to a broader social perspective. *Idiography* refers to a deeply detailed and one-of-a-kind description of the phenomenon as it was experienced by people (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). The scope of IPA is inductive, so wide research questions, such as those utilized in this study, are optimal and permit the formation of surprising themes. In addition, researchers employing IPA must be flexible with their ideas and amenable to interpretations of data based on participant replies rather than their own convictions alone (Goodman, 2016). IPA is idiographic in that it emphasizes detailed and in-depth analyses of how individuals in their unique situations make sense of a particular phenomenon; it attempts to learn from each participant's distinctive story, and via a deep individualized study, a more illuminating understanding of participants' thoughts, beliefs, and behaviors may be attained (Noon, 2018). Each case is crucial to IPA research; the investigator attempts to gain as much knowledge as possible about each instance before moving on to the next (Cassidy et al., 2011). Even during its later cross-case analysis, IPA remains true to the individual, illuminating both the living world of respondents who have told their experiences and how they correlate with more universal patterns (Smith & Eatough, 2006).

The phenomenological nature of this qualitative case study allowed for a rich inquiry into how the target group of students perceived and experienced the phenomena of a sense of

belonging, safety, and inclusive pedagogy in the context of the intersection of their race, gender, and sexuality. Through interpretive phenomenological analysis, phenomenology guided this study in extracting the essence of individuals' experiences with the phenomena. In this process, phenomenology considered participants' perspectives while enabling them to recount their stories in own words in accordance with the context they lived in. Hermeneutics helped the study interpret participants' accounts based on their inner perspectives. Lastly, this study used idiography to detail how the participants made sense of their perspectives and experiences and to and to produce insights to help refine EDI approaches and practices (e.g., the factors that enhance or hinder the phenomena and potential strategies for navigating those experiences).

Hence, the unification of phenomenology and case study produced rich and holistic evidence, including how the target group, based on the intersection of their race, gender, and sexuality, perceived and experienced a sense of belonging, safety, and inclusive pedagogy; how they interpreted their lived experience in light of multiple identity markers; how they responded to these experiences; and insights arising from those experiences that can help refine EDI approaches and practices.

Methods

Context and Study Site

This phenomenological case study was situated in the context of the perceptions and lived experiences of racialized immigrant and racialized international students (the target group). This study focused on giving a voice to the target group of participants by providing information regarding which factors either impeded or contributed to the development of their sense of belonging and experience of safety and inclusive pedagogy, how they did so, and how the participants strategized to navigate those experiences. Through this exploration, this study came

to an understanding of what else would be imperative to refining EDI approaches and practices and how these recommendations could be implemented. The setting of the study was centralized in HE at one Western Canadian research university, namely the University of Manitoba (UM)—an institution of the U-15 in Canada (a consortium of several of the most research-intensive universities in Canada). I carried out this study at a single institution due to the nature of the phenomenological case study research design in order to gain a better understanding of the units of analysis, meaning students' perceptions and experiences of that particular phenomenon.

Population, Participants, and Sampling

All the graduate students studying in different departments of the University of Manitoba, on both the Fort Garry and Bannatyne campuses, were considered to be the population for this study. However, the study focused on a specific cohort: racialized immigrant and racialized international graduate students. Due to the nature of the study, it incorporated multiple student identities, namely race, gender, and sexuality. "There is no right answer to the question of...sample size" in IPA research, claimed Smith et al. (2022, p. 56). However, in order to embrace its idiographic commitment, smaller concentrated samples are frequently used (Noon, 2018). According to Clarke (2010), the recommended sample size for Ph.D. students is four to ten, whereas three is the standard sample number for undergraduate or masters-level IPA study. Even a single-participant study has been justified as long as a very strong or convincing argument can be made for it (Smith, 2004). I was eager to use a sample that could produce enough information to allow me to undertake a thorough examination, but I was also conscious of potential issues that could arise from data overload. While Creswell (2007) argued that the ideal case study sample size should be no more than five participants to allow for in-depth identification and analysis of themes, this study managed to include thirteen participants in an

effort to achieve data saturation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Coyle (2014) noted that the average sample size in traditional phenomenological studies is between one and twelve.

Sampling Procedure and Participant Recruitment

The study identified and recruited participants through a recruitment flyer indicating participants' inclusion criteria. The criterion involved participants' identification as racialized immigrant or racialized international students based on the definitions of "racialized person," "immigrant," and "international student" articulated in the recruitment flyer. The potential participants' identity included either gender diversity (male/female/non-binary/trans) and/or sexual orientation (2SLGBTQIA+), and they needed to have already completed one year of the program (master's or Ph.D.) in which they were studying. All the graduate students who met these important criteria initially qualified from the wider population. This process is regarded as criterion sampling (Patton, 2002) and also suggests how this study includes the inclusion/exclusion criteria of the participants. This flyer also briefly informed the participants about the study, what they would be asked to do, and the time required to be involved. I relied on different institutions and groups (Office of Institutional Analysis, Graduate Students Association, University Union, International Student Center, International Students' Association, and Rainbow Mosaic) as gateways within the UM context to access potential participants. Upon approval, these organizations, on my behalf, circulated the recruitment flyer using their platforms and facilities in all ways possible (e.g., via email, posting on their office notice boards). Upon reading the flyer, students who were interested in participating in my study contacted me directly via UM email or phone call, as provided.

No screening process was carried out other than seeking representation (e.g., different combinations of intersectionality—gender and sexual orientation) based on the responses from

the potential participants. This recruitment phase enabled me to identify the students purposely to ensure a range of participants who covered the needs of my sample; this type of recruitment is called maximum variation sampling and falls under the category of purposive sampling (Patton, 2002). Maximum variation sampling selects for various attributes to ensure the participants' representativeness and diversity in the study (Palinkas et al., 2015). Seidman (2006) stated that "maximum variation sampling provides the most effective basic strategy for selecting participants for interview studies" (p. 52). Based on the responses from interested students, I sent them the consent form via UM email, asking them to review it carefully. If the participants did wish to review the consent form to understand their role in the study, I was available via email (UM email), phone call, or remote meeting (UM Zoom platform)—whatever means they preferred. After reviewing the form, when they ultimately decided to participate in the study, they returned me the consent form with their e-signature indicating they were recruited and signed up for individual interview sessions on a mutually convenient date and time. This is how my sampling procedure occurred, and finally, I was able to recruit thirteen participants.

Data Collection Procedures

Interview Design. Based on the qualitative nature and phenomenological perspective of this research, which was centered on understanding the lived experiences of racialized immigrant and racialized international students, interview was the primary approach for collecting narrative data from participants. The motivation for employing phenomenological, in-depth interviews was derived from related research on meaning-making. According to Vagle (2018), the purpose of an interview is to learn "as much as possible from those who have experienced the phenomenon" (p. 91). Similarly, Jones et al. (2014) stressed that personal interviews as a method of data collection provide an opportunity to get an in-depth understanding of "a particular

everyday phenomenon" (p. 90). The purpose of the interviews in this study was to extract descriptive information about the experiences of the participants. According to Miller and Glassner in Silverman (2004), "a strength of qualitative interviewing is the opportunity it provides to collect and rigorously examine narrative accounts" (p. 137). Marshall and Rossman (2011) stressed that a study concentrating on individual lived experience often employs an in-depth interview technique; "the primary strategy is to capture the deep meaning of experience in the participants' own words" (p. 55). This qualitative interview process rapidly generated voluminous data, allowing for follow-up and clarification with participants (Jimenez, 2015).

Semi-structured one-on-one interviews were conducted, providing a balance of organized and less structured open-ended questioning that allowed for conversational improvisation and adaptability (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Vagle, 2018). The semi-structured approach to interviewing allowed the content of the interviews to be loosely constructed around the units of analysis (sense of belonging, safety, and inclusive pedagogy) and the conversation to emerge organically, permitting participants to share relevant experiences and "define the world uniquely" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 110). The adaptability of the semi-structured interview technique also let me respond to unanticipated information gleaned from participant comments that prompted further investigation of the study issues. All interviews were audio-recorded on a password-protected mobile device and transcribed verbatim by an external transcription service (Otter – an automated, secure, web-based transcription service) that provided a non-disclosure agreement. The audio recording of the interviews offered a record of the interview information and made it easy to check the interviewees' statements. During the interviews, in addition to audio recordings, I took field notes on facial expressions, hesitancies, and body language. Together with the audio recordings, this approach provided a comprehensive picture of the

participants' perspectives and experiences about the units of inquiry. The correctness of participant testimony was ensured by direct transcription of participant responses. In accordance with Glesne's (2010) suggestions for qualitative research, manual notetaking was avoided during interviews to eliminate distractions and maximize the capacity to pay attention to participant responses. The maximum duration of each interview was about 60 minutes long, and all interviews were conducted in English. All the standard procedures, principles, and guidelines for the interview sessions that were drafted beforehand and accordingly communicated to the potential participants were maintained. Participants selected for the interview sessions were advised that their participation was voluntary and that they might withdraw their agreement at any time without penalty (Shenton, 2004). The only restriction they needed to be mindful about was the time frame and/or phases of data analysis (which were mentioned in the consent form), as after a certain point in the study they would not be able to withdraw. In addition, participants were encouraged to express any questions they might have regarding the research topic or methodology, and in an effort to establish rapport, they were engaged in free-flowing conversation.

Data Analysis

In order to make sense of what the researcher has observed, heard, and read, data analysis involves organizing and interpreting the information (Glesne, 2010). IPA features a flexible set of rules that investigators can adjust according to their research purpose; in fact, researchers are encouraged to think creatively (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2012). Nonetheless, IPA is characterized by a set of common concepts that begin with a standard thematic analysis but go beyond it (Noon, 2018). The extant study employed thematic analysis, a form of methodology that discovers themes in the phenomenon being studied (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). "Theme is used as

an attribute, descriptor, element, and concept. As an implicit topic that organizes a group of repeating ideas, it enables researchers to answer the study question" (Vaismoradi et al., 2016, p. 101). This sort of analysis enables the researcher to synthesize thoughts based on responses to interview questions (Vaismoradi et al., 2016). In the process of thematic analysis, the researcher transcribes the text and then uses textual data to identify similar themes at various levels (Nowell et al., 2017). Multiple detailed readings and a review of the raw data are used to build themes without relying on preconceived notions as part of a process of general inductive coding to evaluate and interpret data from participant interview replies (Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Thomas, 2006; Vagle, 2018).

Steps for conducting thematic analysis maintained in this study included the following, which were offered by Noon (2018):

Reading and note making. During the initial phase of data analysis, I read and reread my transcripts; to facilitate my full integration in the process, I chose to listen to audio recordings of the interviews while reading the transcripts—my goal was to become as "near" as possible to the data. With each reading, the text was commented on with initial thoughts; a large margin on the transcript was used in Microsoft Word comment format for this purpose. While there were no restrictions on what could be commented on (Sparkes & Smith, 2014), notes were taken on any comments, observations, and/or reflections surrounding participants' accounts. It was necessary to go beyond basic description; I tended to analyze not only what was said but also how it was stated and what this truly informed me about the event—this was crucial to ensuring that I could provide a more in-depth, interpretive analysis. Open annotated coding ensured that different voices could emerge from participants' stories, as opposed to preconceived assumptions found in the literature (Noon, 2018).

Notes to emergent themes. Once the transcripts were read, reread, and marked, I returned to each one from the beginning and recorded any developing themes. As extensive and detailed comments were created in the preceding phase, I extracted emergent ideas from the notes, looking back at my research questions. During the initial phase of note-taking, I began to detect recurring themes; however, it was during this second phase that I condensed these early notes into short words that captured the essence of what had been unearthed from the transcript. While these emergent themes were at a level a little more abstract than that of the initial notes—allowing for theoretical connections to be drawn—they remained grounded in the particularity of the participants' initial responses.

Connecting emergent themes. As instructed by Smith and Osborn (2008), I conducted this step on a separate sheet of paper, with the emergent themes already written in chronological order, based on the order in which they appeared in the transcripts. While the majority of themes clustered together, some emerged as superordinate concepts, maintaining hierarchical relationships with one another, and some were eliminated from the process entirely due to a lack of supporting evidence and/or reiteration. As emergent themes were clustered, thereby becoming sub-themes, I referred to the transcripts to ensure the connections were consistent with the raw data; at this point, I deviated from the exact words of participants as per the interpretive analysis, but I was careful to maintain the essence of the participant's testimonies.

Producing table of themes. After subthemes were assembled into superordinate themes, offering a composite representation of experience (Denovan & Macaskill, 2012), they were displayed in a table. The table situated sub-themes within their respective superordinate themes, along with a relevant data extract or quote next to each theme, followed by the page number of

the relevant transcript; this preserved the voice of individual participants' personal stories and allowed the reader to track the analytic journey from the primary sources to the table of themes.

Continuing to the next case. The next step was moving on to the next transcript and repeating the process. Earlier IPA literature (Smith et al., 2022) suggested that the researcher may choose to use themes from the first case to assist in subsequent analyses. However, later discussions have placed a greater emphasis on approaching each case "on its own terms, to do justice to its own individuality" (Smith et al., 2022, p. 100). During this process, I assumed that my analysis would be influenced by my discoveries from prior reports, but I did my best to bracket the concepts that would have emerged from earlier transcripts.

Final table and analysis. After analyzing each transcript, I created a final table of superordinate themes and their related subthemes. During this iterative process, I returned to the table of themes for each participant, reviewed them, and, if necessary, made any necessary modifications before returning to the original transcripts. As this research involved multiple issues of inquiry, the difficulty was choosing which themes to prioritize and which to abandon. Smith and Osborn (2008) advised that themes should not be chosen solely on the basis of their frequency in the data but also on the basis of the depth of the passages that highlight said themes and how the themes illuminate other elements of the narrative.

Due to the inductive and interpretive nature of the research, the study was not framed by a single theoretical framework. Instead, a number of theories, namely CRT, the theory of students' integration, engagement, and involvement, and ecological and validation theory, informed the interpretation of thematic findings. Highlighted discoveries identified through the data analysis process were compared to the theoretical frameworks as a way to explain what the target groups had been experiencing within classroom spaces with regard to their belongingness

and safety issues and were used to produce conclusions about how to help EDI efforts build an inclusive learning community. Moreover, the theoretical lens facilitated the production and situation of emerging themes to answer the research questions by providing a cross-analysis of the themes. Of importance, the framework provided a sense of how the intersection of the participants' race, gender, and sexuality played an influential role in producing the findings and shaping the discussion.

Additionally, field notes taken during the interviews and interview analysis were examined and analyzed. Observations during the interviews and subsequent reflections on the interviews were captured using analytic memos, which were defined by Marshall and Rossman (2011) as documents in which "the researcher writes his thoughts about how the data are coming together in clusters or patterns he sees as the data accumulate" (p. 213). These memos facilitated the identification of intra-participant connections and patterns, as well as the emergence of themes that showed up in multiple participants' comments.

Strategy for Data Quality: Validity, Trustworthiness, and Transferability

In phenomenological research, the researcher is involved in all phases of the study, which, according to Vagle (2018), necessitates "continuous involvement with the phenomena and the participants who have experienced the phenomenon" (p. 72). This continuous involvement generated interaction between my positionality, prior knowledge, and the study's findings. Recognizing my function as a phenomenological researcher, I utilized a variety of methods to highlight this interaction and its impact on my analysis of the phenomenon under investigation.

To begin, as a researcher, I utilized journaling to practice critical reflexivity (Merriam & Tisdale, 2016; Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Vagle, 2018). This technique allowed me to examine and reflect on how my perspective and experience affected various areas of the research process.

Probst and Berenson (2014) asserted that reflexivity "is both a mental state and a set of acts" (p. 814). Consistent with this argument, I employed journaling to record my personal views, ideas, and exchanges with thought partners throughout the research process in an effort to retain relational competency and recognition of my positionality and assumptions (Jones et al., 2014).

Secondly, regarding the study's credibility, I applied a technique proposed by Nowell et al. (2017) to raise the chance of high credibility: the triangulation of sources. This exercise helped to confirm the credibility of the sources by comparing them to similar sources. Additional evidence was reviewed by comparing each source to additional evidence regarding the source that was linked. In order to accomplish triangulation and corroboration of emerging findings, different sources and data collection techniques were used (Jones et al., 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Triangulation sources for the purposes of this study included each interview transcription, responses to the request to participate, interview notes, and analytic memos. Each participant submitted information that was compared to that of other participants. The triangulation of data sources and methods linked multiple, distinct data points to generate thematic divisions within the study.

Next, each participant received a copy of their written transcript via email for member-checking reasons (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). They could review the material gathered during the individual interviews and verify it, correct it, or affirm that the transcript accurately reflected their comments. In the member-checking process, I provided each participant with the opportunity to confirm or modify my interpretations through a follow-up email. This allowed them to provide additional context or to clarify their perspectives. Their input was invaluable in honing the analysis, guaranteeing that the final interpretations were both rooted in my initial

understanding and endorsed by the participants. It is worth noting that none of the participants suggested any changes when asked to review my interpretations.

Finally, according to Nowell et al. (2017), the trustworthiness of research and the researcher in qualitative studies is primarily dependent on credibility, which refers to activities that enhance the likelihood of generating credible findings and interpretations. They also highlighted transferability, which involves providing a detailed description that enables others to assess whether transferring the findings to different contexts is feasible. Transferability is the criterion for measuring the validity and reliability of qualitative research. As previously discussed in this chapter, maximum-variation sampling was used to pick participants. Nowell et al. (2017) stated that a responsible researcher must employ a strategy of purposive sampling that allows for a wide variety of relevant data to be included in the analysis. Consequently, this maximum-variation sampling provided a broad range of data to aid in the "thick description" that is essential for transferability.

Methodological Limitation

Primarily, a methodological limitation warrants consideration at this stage of my study. In my study, the target population was limited to racialized immigrant and racialized international students at a single institution. The findings, therefore, cannot be generalized beyond this population.

Ethical Considerations

Recognition of control and power difficulties in research interactions is a fundamental principle of qualitative investigation (Jones et al., 2014; Mertens, 2015; Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Tracy, 2013). Due to the relational nature of qualitative research, Ravitch and Carl (2016) argued that relational considerations must be framed as ethical issues. In accordance with this direction,

I examined measures to ensure the cautious and deliberate development of ethical authenticity in my connections with study participants. Primarily, I focused on mitigating the influence that my positionality might have on the study process (bracketing my own perceptions and my experiences as an immigrant and international student and as a researcher), as well as on obtaining voluntary and informed consent and protecting the privacy and confidentiality of participants.

The concept of consent represents participants' permission to engage in research in a "both informed and voluntary" manner (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 360). As a result, I informed participants of the study's aim, objectives, and procedures and guaranteed that their participation was entirely voluntary. During the recruitment phase of the study, many types of communications were used to recruit participants. These communications emphasized the voluntary nature of participation, clarified the separation between my roles as a researcher and a professional, and explained the rationale for investigating the existing study. This information was reiterated verbally and used in the informed consent form presented to each participant during the semi-structured interview process. At any point during the research process, participants were able to ask clarifying questions, halt the interview, refuse to answer questions, or revoke their consent to participate without repercussions. Providing participants with consistent, clear information on the topic and procedures of the research, as well as frequent reminders of the voluntary nature of the participants' involvement, aimed to limit the influence of my implied authority over volunteers.

The informed consent procedure informed each participant of the study's privacy and confidentiality safeguards. As the principal researcher, I selected pseudonyms for participants to avoid the possibility that they might self-select names that could potentially identify them (e.g., family member names) and therefore potentially jeopardize their anonymity (Allen & Wiles,

2015). When assigning pseudonyms to each participant, considerable consideration was made to align pseudonyms with each participant's ethnicity and gender, to the extent that their original name matched their ethnicity and gender. Participants were informed that there were minimal risks associated with their participation (e.g., feeling uncomfortable when answering questions or being mentally charged), that they were offered access to services outside of the university's mental health/well-being services, and that their identities were safeguarded to the greatest extent possible.

Participants were advised of the immediate benefits they might enjoy as a result of their engagement, such as the possibility that the perceptions and experiences they described could, with critical thought, be used to improve the institution's EDI processes. In addition, participants were notified that they could withdraw from the study at any moment without fear of repercussions. In addition, each participant was informed that all research data (surveys, notes, recordings, and transcriptions) would be stored on a locked, password-protected computer or word processing program and cloud service (the university-provided OneDrive) and would be deleted after a certain period of time. Participants received compensation as a token of appreciation for their participation in the study.

The following chapter presents the findings of the data collected from the participants. This chapter documents narrative descriptions of what the participants recounted during the interview sessions. All the data are presented in a way that complies with ethics and addresses the methodological framework.

Chapter Four

The Study Findings and Results

Introduction

This study is tailored to explore racialized immigrant and racialized international students' perceptions and experiences of belongingness, safe space, and inclusive pedagogy at UM. With special attention to the intersection of race with gender and sexual diversity in classroom settings, the study addressed three research questions: 1. What are racialized immigrant and racialized international students' perceptions and experiences of sense of belonging, safe space, and inclusive pedagogy in higher education? 2. What are the factors that either hinder or promote their sense of belonging and experience of safe space and inclusive pedagogy, and what strategies have they developed in response to these specific experiences? 3. What can we learn from those students' experiences to help refine EDI approaches and practices?

This chapter presents the findings that have been extracted from the textual data, meaning the narratives yielded by the participants during the thirteen interview sessions. The sessions were designed to collect data and were scheduled at mutually convenient times. Each session featured a one-on-one interview session in the English language, lasting approximately 60 minutes, with participants who had consented to participate remotely via UM's authorized Zoom platform. Throughout the sessions, I aimed to cultivate a positive connection with the participants, fostering an open and respectful environment that could ensure the research space remained engaging, encouraging, and welcoming. The creation of such a space, in my view, stemmed from the disclosure of my identity as an immigrant and racialized student. This identity aligned closely with the participants' identity markers (e.g., cultural, social, religious, and regional perspectives), facilitating the establishment of rapport with them. This alignment made

it easier for participants, who were already seeking a platform, to express their experiences with the issues that my study aimed to investigate. The participants' accounts, appreciation, and interest in my study attested to my fair and friendly positioning as a researcher who sought to maintain a safe space. By offering encouragement and understanding that their voices matter, I allowed them to provide free and frank answers. These efforts, combined with my frequent smiles and nods, encouraged them to bring up and share relevant instances they had been actively and passively observing in their programs of study. The following are a couple of representative snippets extracted from the participants in this regard:

Pari expressed,

> Queer white women are more represented than subcontinental women. So that's why I wanted to bring in a piece of the subcontinent into the picture as well, to just increase the demographic of that, and in terms of the representation and the visibility. So that's what made me interested in your study and this interview today. I would have missed out this amazing opportunity of learning about your study and giving my two cents about.

Albert thought,

> The reason I opted to be part of this study is—here at the University of Manitoba, because we have people from different backgrounds, sometimes accommodating all these differences create[s] some problems and instances where, depending on your ethnicity and race, you may experience some systemic barriers. So, I am interested in sharing my experience when it comes to my classroom and then educational kind of experience within the University of Manitoba and even across Canada.

Najib passionately articulated,

> Your study and your topic is very interesting. And it is very rich, I mean, highlighting the experiences of marginalized people. For me, as a minority as a person of colour, as a Muslim, as a Palestinian, [it is] accepted to be racist to Muslims, nobody actually asked about how we were feeling, how will we help. So, when I am allowed or given opportunity to talk about or participate in research that does or opens the door about and for experiences like mine to merge through to come through, or usually they come on.

As well, Zara briefly stated, "I really feel that international students' perspectives are underrepresented. And I really wish that my perspective can be published. And I want to let more people to learn about international students' experience in Canada."

The data underwent a rigorous process of extraction and categorization involving thematic analysis. When it came to extraction, I started by preparing the transcriptions by thoroughly listening to and observing the recorded video clips multiple times to ensure I extracted the textual data correctly and captured the participants' actual articulation. Once I had prepared all the transcripts, I read them all multiple times, one after another; this reiterated reading of the transcription helped me to organize the data according to the interview questions and the probing that came up where required during the interview sessions. For example, to understand participants' perception of sense of belonging, safe space, and inclusive pedagogy, I asked them to define each concept, and I followed up using various probes, such as what made and what did not make them feel that they belonged and were safe in class, and which instructors' approaches they liked or do not like, to seek information regarding inclusive pedagogy. Not only was this transcript-organizing process instrumental to approaching my data, but it was also assistive in consolidating similar data together according to the key topics of the interviews (e.g., sense of belonging, safe space, inclusive pedagogy, influencing factors, and

EDI). This was the mechanism I employed to categorize the data in connection with the participants' answers to each predetermined interview questions.

Organizing the data after proper extraction and systematic categorization led me to look for pertinent themes in order to deal with and present the voluminous data in coherent chunks and make sense of the data with respect to the themes and sub-themes I had identified. Along the way, the research questions also played a crucial role in facilitating the filtering of the relevant textual data and presenting them in the form of emerging themes and sub-themes, which involved synthesizing the textual data and utilizing the participants' verbatim quotes as snippets where necessary. Of note, I grouped the data, represented by the voices of the participants, into in different themes and sub-themes in a way that mobilized the theoretical frameworks I have described in Chapter 1. A range of theoretical frameworks and their tenets (e.g., CRT, validation theory, integration theory, engagement/involvement theory) were found to be plausibly linked to the textual data. These frameworks were instrumental in examining the multifaceted perspectives the data conveyed and facilitated the data sorting process to address the issues prevalent in educational institutions. For example, I mobilized CRT when the study sought information from the participants about the interaction between white and non-white students in the classroom; CRT asserts the "other" vs "us" dichotomy, which reflected experiences such as the one Hossain—one of the participants—recalled in which white Canadian students generally showed little interest in interacting with non-white students and habitually positioned themselves on one side of the classroom. This incident is a case representing how white students often oppose non-white students' presence and create majoritarian stories that take advantage of racial privilege. This was also evident in John's narrative, as he expressed a sense of being unfairly judged, perceiving that others harbored prejudices against him. He believed that many mainstream

Canadian students considered him neither a capable student nor an effective leader, and as a result, they felt he should not be responsible for a group assignment. In contrast, he felt that his peers, being white, saw themselves as more qualified to lead, which he interpreted as an assertion of white privilege and supremacy. John viewed this behavior as an attempt to dominate and marginalize other students, preventing them from sharing their own perspectives. This finding reminded me of the function of the CRT principle of dismantling white-constructed knowledge and power dynamics through the voices and counter-stories of marginalized students. Similarly, Najib explained the importance of opportunities for individuals from diverse backgrounds and for those with diverse histories to share their own stories authentically. He highlighted that the ability to represent oneself within the spaces we inhabit is crucial. Najib also stressed that telling one's own story, without relying on others to narrate it, was a central goal he worked toward. I grouped these findings according to the tenets of CRT, particularly "counter-storytelling," as the tone of the findings reflected a significant alignment with this specific tenet.

Summary of the Participants

Before discussing the detailed and complete findings, this section depicts a brief introduction to each participant in the following manner. The information was collected during a demographic section of the interviews in which participants were asked to share their program name and study duration and to identify their race/ethnicity, and were provided options to identify their gender and sexual orientation.

The study's demographic composition offered significant strengths and potential shortfalls in capturing the complexity of racialized immigrant and racialized international students' experiences of belonging, safety, and inclusive pedagogy. On one hand, the diverse racial, ethnic, and migration backgrounds of the participants allowed for comparative insights

into how these groups navigate institutional spaces, particularly due to the inclusion of a Caucasian international student who nevertheless self-identified as a racialized individual, further enriching the examination of whiteness in shaping belonging. Additionally, the representation of multiple disciplines, including STEM, social sciences, and environmental studies, broadened the scope of analysis, while variations in years of study provided both short- and long-term perspectives on institutional support.

Table 1

Summary of the Participants

Program	Pseudonyms	Years Studied	Gender Identity	Sexual Orientation	Race/Ethnicity	Participant's Migration Status	Identified as a Racialized Person
Ph.D. in Microbiology	Pari	4	Female	Queer	Indian (Bengali)	International	Yes
Ph.D. in Physiology	Behzad	2.5	Male	Heterosexual	Iranian	International	Yes
Ph.D. in Biomedical Engin.	Zara	4	Female	Heterosexual	Iranian	International	Yes
Ph.D. in Education	Hossain	6	Male	Heterosexual	Bangladeshi (Bengali)	Immigrant	Yes
Ph.D. in Social Work	Albert	3	Male	Heterosexual	Ghanian (African)	International	Yes
Ph.D. in Peace and Conflict Studies	Najib	5	Male	Heterosexual	Palestinian (Asian Arabic)	Immigrant	Yes
Ph.D. in Food and Human Nutrition	Ayra	1	Female	Heterosexual	Sri Lankan (Singhalese)	Immigrant	Yes
Ph.D. in Education	Loren	1	Female	Heterosexual	Trinidadian-Caribbean (South Asian)	Immigrant	Yes
Ph.D. in Education	Robert	1	Male	Heterosexual	Caucasian (England)	Immigrant	Yes
Ph.D. in Education	John	1	Male	Heterosexual	Chinese	International	Yes
Master in Natural Resource Management	Aarvi	1	Female	Heterosexual	Sri Lankan (Singhalese)	International	Yes
Master in Education	Bela	2	Female	Heterosexual	Chinese (Mandarin)	International	Yes
Master in Education	Rahi	2	Female	Heterosexual	South American (Latino)	International	Yes

However, the study also presented some demographic gaps that might affect its comprehensiveness. The absence of Black Canadian and Southeast Asian voices limited the exploration of experiences shaped by colonial histories and systemic barriers, while the underrepresentation of 2SLGBTQIA+ perspectives, with only one queer participant, restricted a fully intersectional analysis. Furthermore, an imbalance in disciplinary representation, particularly the stronger presence of participants from Education and Social Sciences compared

to STEM fields, might have overlooked the unique challenges faced by racialized students in science-based disciplines. Similarly, the lack of Master's students from STEM programs limited the study's ability to distinguish between short-term and long-term integration experiences. While these limitations should be acknowledged, the study's overall demographic diversity offered a well-rounded yet nuanced foundation for analyzing the institutional experiences of racialized immigrant and racialized international students in higher education.

The forthcoming section presents a comprehensive analysis of the research findings, structured around a series of primary headings that aim to articulate the key themes identified, followed by a detailed outline of the relevant sub-themes.

Meaning Making of Sense of Belonging, Safe Space, and Inclusive Pedagogy

This section, by and large, amalgamates the participants' perceptions and experiences around sense of belonging, safe space, and inclusive pedagogy, with special attention to classroom contexts. I have broken down this section into several themes and sub-themes related to the main concepts, namely, sense of belonging, safe space, and inclusive pedagogy.

Sense of Belonging

Beyond Inclusion: Embracing Acceptance, Representation, and Respect

One of the core points that came out of the participants' narratives representing their perceptions of sense of belonging was that belonging relates to feeling accepted, represented, and respected. These three notions appeared with different meanings in the participants' articulations. For some participants, "being accepted" and "being respected" surfaced interchangeably while they were defining "sense of belonging." The participants also perceived the terms differently based on their worldviews, beliefs, opinions, contributions, and other characteristics attached to them as individuals. In Zara's perception,

> Belonging happens when someone values me no matter what I don't have; rather, it matters what I have. It happens when we can relate and make sense to others what we belong to and what it means to us, and it matters later how they accept me knowing all these things.

Najib defined sense of belonging as "when our worldview is respected and accepted because the world around you, your new surroundings, your new country and your city, your everybody around you, understands you or talk to you in a way that works for them."

Aarvi also perceived,

> A new setting or new community or when I go to interact with a new team or university class, if I feel they respect me, and if I feel my opinions accepted, then I feel like I belong to this group. Respect and acceptance is important to value us and understand us because we have to adapt to the new settings, we have to balance between our cultural or attitudes in our own country to a new setting where their culture is different.

With regard to acceptance, a student's sexual orientation determined "acceptance" and so influenced the student's sense of belonging and ability to make meaning of sense of belonging. Pari, the participant from the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, reported how her non-visible sexual orientation (queer) resulted in encountering bad experiences from her own ethnic community while she found the white community to be supportive and appreciative. In this context, Pari perceived the following regarding her sense of belonging:

> With peers from the same racial community as mine, because many peers who belong to the subcontinent are not very appreciative or supportive of the core part of my identity. But being queer, which is I find more acceptance in LGBT spaces, which are ironically predominantly white. But, again, in terms of acceptance within my own community, I

> think my sexual identity or being a person who is queer, that will be more of a problem to fit in and navigate that space.

"Being represented" referred to the representation of marginalized students in the curriculum and the reflection of their identities through racial mirrors, allowing students with similar demographics to share their unique stories, common experiences, and challenges. In particular, Loren indicated,

> I would define it as having your worldview represented and expressed and visible….that would mean in the curriculum, in the way [of] what we are presented with as materials for readings, who we are reading, you know, reading all white mainstream men, are we reading diverse thinkers, and academics, what we're reading, who we're reading, and where the material is coming from?

Rahi referred to "being represented" as a sense of belonging when students with different demographics were able to share their experiences. As she remarked,

"I belong….we share the same experiences when they talk to me about the different stereotypes and the different challenges they face here, when they come to Canada."

The sense of belonging among participants was seen to be closely tied to feeling accepted, respected, and represented in their new surroundings. Acceptance and respect were perceived in the validation of their perspectives and input, while representation was associated with encountering their identities and experiences mirrored in the curriculum and communal stories within the community.

Fitting In: Finding Your True Place

Participants' perceptions of sense of belonging suggested that it was a matter of feeling comfort in a particular place so that students could fit in a particular situation or environment.

"Fitting in" reflected participants' varied experiences of belonging, where feelings of comfort, self-expression, and inclusion could be influenced by the social and cultural dynamics within academic spaces. Referring to fit in a particular situation, Ayra shared,

> For me, I think it's like how we feel comfortable in a setting…especially in academic and social…when like more Canadians are there….I feel like I'm a little bit different, I felt like okay, I'm not in that group or I'm not part of that group.

In terms of comfort, Pari mentioned, "I define belonging as a comfortable place; you can explain how you feel about something and that you can be yourself, but you feel part of the team." The perception of sense of belonging also referred to being oneself in comfort and to exposure without manipulating what one is to align with mainstream rules, norms, and etiquette. In this regard, in Loren's perception, "One thing that I find creates a sense of not belonging is having to follow the etiquette rules…like minorities, racialized minorities are expected to soften their information when they disagree more than mainstream white students."

Participants perceived a sense of belonging as feeling comfortable and able to be oneself in an environment without the need to conform to mainstream norms, with discomfort arising when differences from the mainstream led to feelings of exclusion or lack of confidence.

More Than Seen: Feeling Acknowledged, Heard, and Welcome

It is evident from the findings that participants perceived a sense of belonging when they were welcomed, their voices were heard, and they were acknowledged in diverse classroom settings. They felt that their perspectives were not acknowledged in terms of their current situation and background when they came to the classroom, as per John's experience. He perceived,

> Before I came to Canada, I do not have a lot of experience to work in group… so I asked for clarification. But the reality is that if I do not answer it, if I do not ask this question to the professor, they will not take international students' perspective into account when they assign them to assignment. They just take it for granted. They just assume that I can finish the assignment without any instructions.

Hossain, in his account, revealed his dissatisfaction because he did not feel welcomed with respect to his academic experience and its pedagogical aspects at large. He asserted, "As I move forward with my education, and my experience with my colleagues and teachers, I didn't feel that much welcoming in relation to the academic sides."

Participants perceived that a sense of belonging was fostered when they felt welcomed, heard, and acknowledged, yet they often experienced a lack of recognition of their perspectives and backgrounds in academic settings, leading to feelings of exclusion and dissatisfaction.

Safe Space

This study aimed to gather insights into the perception and experience of safe spaces among racialized immigrant and racialized international students. Here, the objective was to delve into various sub-themes and to provide a comprehensive understanding of the overall perspectives around safe space. To this end, the definition of "safe space" I operationalized in this study helped generate the related sub-themes and group the relevant findings around them. The definition is as follows:

> This study regards safe space in terms of epistemic and emotional safety—the former refers to promoting epistemic agency, and the latter denotes dignity safety (see Harless, 2018). Epistemic agency pertains to a student's capacity to actively participate in knowledge creation. Ensuring such agency requires challenging traditional classroom

> norms and dynamics that often favor the epistemic contributions of dominant social identities, thereby marginalizing others. Emotional safety, on the other hand, refers to the psychological responses that shape our feelings and emotional experiences, particularly negative ones. This concept includes what is termed "dignity safety," which relates to the anxiety of being perceived as inferior and the fear of experiencing humiliation.

Knowledge Without Fear: Advancing Epistemic Safety and Agency

Epistemic safety refers to promoting the epistemic agency—the ability to contribute to knowledge production—of students from marginalized groups. Epistemic safety involves disrupting classroom norms and dynamics that tend to privilege the epistemic agency of more dominant social identities at the expense of others. Systematic violations of epistemic agency constitute what Dotson (2014) called epistemic oppression—often occurring (either intentionally or unconsciously) through the actions of socially dominant groups, perpetuating what is known as epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007). The following findings provide a detailed and extensive depiction of this sub-theme, yielded from the participating individuals' perceptions.

Najib explained safe space by stating that,

> Safe space, for me, [is] a space [that] allows discussing topics that represent diverse students' perspectives—our perspectives [students of colour and marginalized students], invites students to contribute to the discussion by bringing up their own opinions, and welcomes others to comment on it even if they might have agreement or disagreement. It's not a conflict space or chaotic space, you know, that hinders scholarly discussion with respect to others' demographics.

Hossain thought safe space allows one to demonstrate the intellectual ability "to contribute to the class and to have no anxiety to have challenge in relation to confrontation with white Canadian

students, okay, in relation to exchange of thought." He also extended his thoughts by sharing his experiences, as his account went on, with regard to the epistemic injustice (intentional or unintentional prevention of someone from contributing to knowledge production) that oppressed his epistemic agency through the domination of white students. Hossain reflected on his experience in his first academic class within a Canadian context, where he often felt uncomfortable and unsafe sharing his views. He perceived an indirect dominance by the white Canadian students, who frequently engaged with the professor and dominated class discussions, leaving little room for others to contribute. Hossain observed that this dominance marginalized racialized students, including himself, who felt dismissed despite having the intellectual ability and agency to share their perspectives. This created an environment where students of colour struggled to find space to participate in discussions meaningfully.

Rahi shared her experience of what she believed constituted a "safe space," describing it as an environment where one can express feelings, ideas, and thoughts without fear of rejection or judgment. Reflecting on her first-year classes, she felt that her opinions were not valued, particularly by her white Canadian peers. Despite being in a position to offer a unique perspective based on her diverse educational background, Rahi found that the discussions centered solely on the Canadian experience. The space, which she had hoped would be open and inclusive, became less welcoming when her experiences were overlooked, leaving her feeling that the environment was no longer safe for open dialogue.

Epistemic safety involves creating classroom environments that can protect and promote marginalized students' epistemic agency, enabling them to contribute to knowledge production without fear of dominance or dismissal by socially dominant groups. Participants perceived the importance of safe spaces in classrooms where diverse perspectives are welcomed and respected,

allowing all students to engage in healthy intellectual discussions without facing epistemic injustice or oppression.

Voices Unbound: The Power of Freedom of Expression

The findings indicated that the participants' perception and experience of safe space hinged on situations in which they could freely express themselves, their ideas, and their thoughts.

Pari defined safe space as free expression. She perceived,

> A safe space to me, it will be where me and my other colleagues or peers who come from this very diverse intersectional backgrounds, they can express themselves freely. And maybe people strive to have this very open conversational dialogue about uplifting and encouraging the voices of the marginalized communities.

Likewise, Robert expressed that "safe space would be a place that you can speak what's on your mind, respectfully expect the same return."

Alongside them, Najib believed that safe space offers a space that does not require students to compromise; rather, it drives them to express any issue and take it as a challenge to learn. He mentioned,

> It should be a place that does not need to compromise on any issue. Rather, you can discuss it in the best interest of all the students so that everyone can learn. You can take the challenge of encountering and thrive to new knowledge construction by recognizing what different world view of each other. This process has to be executed in a respectful way, I think.

For some students, this freedom of expression might be thwarted if students having different views or ideologies/values feel unsafe to bring forward their perspectives or are even eager to talk about them because of likely intimidation. As articulated by Albert,

> There have been some instances where I've had difficulties, especially when it comes to issues related to 2SLGBTQIA+. Okay… let me even put it this way: I'm a Christian. And my values that I uphold always contradicts the values of the 2SLGBTQIA+ communities. So, because of that, anytime there are issues that have been raised, I may have contrary views, so I don't even talk about them. I don't feel safe sharing my thoughts and ideas because of how many others who, including the classmates' view, feel attacked or something, right?

The findings suggest that participants perceived a safe space as one where they can freely express their thoughts and ideas without fear of judgment or compromise, although this sense of freedom might be inhibited when conflicting ideologies, such as differing views on 2SLGBTQIA+ issues, make some individuals feel unsafe or reluctant to share their perspectives.

Safe and Respected: Nurturing Emotional and Dignity Safety

"Emotional safety" denotes individuals' psychological responses related to what and how they feel. Emotional safety, which is also known as "dignity safety," pertains to the negative experiences that individuals may encounter, and their anxiety of being ranked as inferior, and the worry of being humiliated. In this regard, Pari shared her perception: "I've seen this among my peers who belong to different minority communities, specifically being ridiculed for their accent, for not being able to be as spontaneous in English."

In relation to humiliation, Loren defined safe space by explaining,

> A safe space would be a space where you are able to contribute in the manner that is comfortable for you to contribute to and you're not labeled, or you know, you're not demeaned or belittled. And even just like silence is demeaning and belittling. When you say something and you don't present it in the way that's comfortable for your peers or even the professor, and there's silence. After, that's demeaning, that's belittling, that's discomforting. That's poisoning the environment for you as a student. So, to be in a safe space for as a student is an environment where you can contribute in a manner that you are comfortable contributing without feeling that you are—that you have to change who you are to be able to contribute to that discussion.

Similarly, Bela articulated "safe space" as an environment where individuals can communicate openly without fear of offending others or being offended themselves. She emphasized the importance of being mindful in conversations, particularly when speaking, to ensure that others do not feel uncomfortable.

Participants' accounts underscored that a safe and respectful environment is one where individuals feel emotionally and psychologically secure as well as free from fear of humiliation, judgment, or the need to conform to dominant norms, allowing them to engage authentically and meaningfully in academic and social interactions.

Inclusive Pedagogy

Mirroring Diversity: Creating Representative and Reflective Learning Spaces

The findings suggest that students' representation and reflection in classroom content can act as a mirror in which they see their own presence, indicating the value bestowed upon them. This representation and reflection may occur by addressing their diverse and unique needs while also incorporating their perspectives and experiences into the learning environment.

In her narration, Pari remarked that inclusive pedagogy should reflect and represent diverse students in the content and examples brought into classroom teaching. As she noted, "using diverse examples that a broader audience can relate to, and have, like, can find familiarity, but there has not been an instance where I felt particularly represented in the classroom." Regarding this matter, Loren perceived that,

> It would be pedagogy that allows for different and diverse representations of the content being delivered; it would be pedagogy that uses different ways of delivering content. We all present and participate in a very mainstream, standardized, neutral, quiet, dispassionate way, way that is comfortable to the mainstream domestic students, because that's what they grew up with. But it's foreign to many non-mainstream students.

Being reflected from an inclusionary point of view has gone further to this discussion of inclusive pedagogy while Najib perceived that,

> It is the ability to create spaces in which people of all kinds, of all backgrounds and all histories from all over the place can see themselves reflected…ability to authentically tell about who we are in the spaces we with, or live in, or exist in is most needed most important. So, for me, inclusive pedagogy is the ability to be able to tell my story.

The findings highlight that inclusive pedagogy may necessitate reflecting on and representing diverse students' perspectives, experiences, and needs within classroom content and examples. This would foster an educational environment where all students can see themselves and their backgrounds acknowledged and valued, ultimately contributing to a more authentic and inclusive learning experience.

Empowered to Grow: Feeling Supported to Learn

The study findings suggest that participants viewed inclusive pedagogy as a teaching approach that fosters a supportive learning environment where all students are encouraged to reach their full potential. Aarvi, in her narration, explained,

> Inclusive pedagogy, to me, it's all about teaching approach. Professors work as facilitators. They feel us supported to learn because if we come across any kind of a problem, and if it can be any kind of review, or if we want something, some clarifications, they are willing to help us. They also help us to access the learning technologies and also, like, consider our previous knowledge. And in our case, that's the thing.

In a similar vein, Loren, drawing on her experiences, maintained that inclusive pedagogy is

> … a pedagogy that allows you to learn full support. You will find profs are genuinely interested in your personal point of view, your personal worldview, your personal opinion. We read the materials. And we come and we have a discussion about it. And we can draw from a lot of our experiences. But then, again, we have to link those experiences to the academic world, which is fine. They do that in the opportunities that they give different ways of having students do assignments, different ways of how they present the material, different ways of providing different opportunities for discussion, so everybody can discuss.

Additionally, inclusive pedagogy involves acknowledging students' cultural practices and educational norms as they adapt to a new learning environment. The absence of such consideration may lead to the application of misinformed assumptions and stereotypes, as reflected in Pari's assertion:

> It's a very common Canadian culture to make eye contact while talking, right. But specifically, like people who are from like, maybe in Asian communities, this might be very, something that occurs. Because we grew up with this sense of respect, not to look into the eyes of like elders or the ones who are we are communicating with, but the professors and instructors might feel that we are being indifferent to them, or we are not really engaging in that conversation. So again, being very mindful that cultural customs can be very different. So just to take that into account, and not just imposing these assumptions, that if a person is not making eye contact, that means that they are not in, like, invested in the conversation.

These accounts of the participants' perceptions and experiences underscore the critical role of inclusive pedagogy in creating a learning environment where students feel supported, respected, and empowered to contribute, highlighting the importance of cultural sensitivity, flexible teaching approaches, and meaningful engagement in fostering academic and personal growth.

Barriers to Sense of Belonging, Safe Space, and Inclusive Pedagogy

This section provides a thorough overview of the research participants' perspectives on sense of belonging, safe space, and inclusive pedagogy, and how these perspectives impacted their personal learning experiences. The participants offered a diverse range of insights into the barriers that restricted their sense of belonging, safe space, and inclusive pedagogy. These perspectives are further explored under sub-themes and are closely linked to the obstacles that impeded the participants' ability to feel and experience a sense of belonging, safe space, and inclusive pedagogy.

Sense of Belonging and Safe Space

Microaggression

The findings suggested that microaggression blatantly occurs in the learning environment and that it significantly victimizes equity-seeking people in various ways. In various instances, several participants expressed concerns that racialized students may face inequities in accessing academic opportunities, while their Canadian counterparts appear to receive advantages that were perceived as disproportionate. In addition to encountering subtle forms of discrimination, racialized students often perceived themselves as being overlooked in terms of their intelligence and language proficiency within the learning environment. In relation to this perspective, Pari reported,

> So, me being a woman and me being a person of colour, and then on top of that being a queer person, is more likely to be overshadowed by a white woman, definitely. There's a lot of, kind, bias favors white female over coloured female students, like if not explicit, but implicit discrimination going on. So, in terms of, like, maybe conferences or, like, selection for presentations, there's always this, like, stigma associated with uplifting women of colour in those situations, and those opportunities will be given to someone who is more, how do I say this, like more of a white-passing person. There's not a lot of scope for really bringing up this as a concern or complaint because there is no evidence, right, that these are the intentions behind that selection. But it's kind of very transparent to us because we have always gone through this situation.

Another participant, Loren, also explained how microaggression occurs:

> In Canadian society, nobody is directly rude and belittling, but their silence is rude and belittling. There is a way to discount somebody's position, their discussion, their sense of

> well-being, without saying a word. Exactly. You do that by moving on by silence, by a look. Because the way you think about myself or the way you treat me, it feels me like, I'm not a part of this, this situation, I'm not part of this event. I feel like I've been isolated.

Likewise, Albert shared his view regarding microaggression, particularly highlighting experiences of belittlement. He articulated,

> They think they're better off than some of us who are coming from outside of Canada or from other racial minority groups. So, they try to downplay your intelligence, and then they always do not want to assert your opinion. Sometimes they even want to brush it over. They will not tell you, but then they will develop ways and means as to they have not heard what you're saying.

Concerning safe space, Loren pointed out negative slant as a form of microaggression that can potentially impact safe space for students. The findings indicated that negatively recognizing and labeling peers based on their cultural background transforms a safe space into an unsafe one, particularly in collaborative learning activities where disagreement may arise. The diversity of students introduces varied viewpoints, opinions, and perspectives, which can be compromised when cultural biases are present. Loren narrated,

> They [white mainstream Canadian students] label it as "right and wrong," not "different." If they labeled it as instead of "that's, that's wrong," the way it looks like, because it's a negative slant. Okay, so nobody goes, "She's loud and passionate. Oh, that's great." They're like, "Yeah, those Caribbeans are very loud and intense, you know, they're always so aggressive." There's a negative strain, but our way is better. Caribbeans are

> really passionate. You know, like, sure, if you want to attach it as a characteristic of the culture, go ahead, but not as "right" or "wrong," not as "better" or "worse."

The findings revealed that microaggressions were perceived as pervasive in the learning environment, occurring primarily between students. These microaggressions disproportionately disadvantaged racialized students by subtly undermining their intelligence, potential, and opportunities while favoring their white counterparts, ultimately leading to a lack of safe spaces for open and respectful discourse.

Language Barrier: A Hardship of Existence

According to a few participants, the language barrier was perceived to influence their sense of belonging in various situations. This barrier impacted the ability of students with limited language proficiency to engage with their native-speaking peers, often discouraging them from participating in conversations due to concerns about being invalidated, judged, or ignored. This perceived obstacle significantly hindered their ability to cultivate a sense of belonging.

Albert, an international Ph.D. student, shared,

> Sometimes even language becomes a barrier for inclusion. So, you see, in the midst of people outside of my cultural background, the speed of the reader, which is fixed, sometimes I hardly understand. So, I normally do not want to engage in some form of communication with them. So, language, as I rightly mentioned—sometimes, if you have an accent, so when you're speaking, they only ask to repeat yourself over and over as to they do not understand what you're talking about. But, yeah, so you are spot on that. Such a hindrance to get connected and so for my belonging.

The language barrier, from a safe space perspective, may also result in humiliation that is related to safety issues. For example, racialized minority students who experience anxiety about

being perceived as inferior may feel their emotional safety compromised due to the privilege conferred upon those who are fluent in English. This is because these students may experience humiliation and feel disregarded when they are not able to be as spontaneous in English as their peers, which can exacerbate existing disparities in educational outcomes. In this regard, Pari explained her perception:

> Some folks in different racialized minorities have also access to education fully in English, right? But there are people who are who do not have that access. So maybe they have had curriculum in their own native vernacular, and then they had to shift to English later on in their life. So, for them, it's more difficult to be as spontaneous in English or deliver a presentation with as much confidence as they would have done in their mother language. So, I'm seeing that this imposes a false sense of power on people who are fluent in English, leading them to feel superior over other, like disregard people unintentionally sometimes and even commit humiliation, you know.

In a similar vein, some students' epistemic safety can be disrupted by classroom dynamics perpetuated by those with dominant identities who tend to demean others whom they perceive to have poor language proficiency—especially those whom they perceive to have an accent, regardless of these speakers' communication abilities. Rahi shared such experiences:

> I think that I am able to communicate well enough, and that I am able to express what I was thinking, but when somebody starts asking you again, like, "What is that? Can you repeat that again? What do you want to say? What do you mean?" then you start doubting yourself. Like, you're not sure if then what you're saying is what you should be saying or if there is something you're not aware of.

The language barrier can hinder students' sense of belonging and participation by limiting their interactions with native-speaking peers, which may lead to misunderstandings about their abilities and contribute to emotional strain and uncertainty. This challenge is particularly pronounced among racialized minority students with limited English fluency, who may experience feelings of exclusion and diminished confidence as a result.

Domination-Subjugation-Marginalization: Voice in the Shadows

When non-mainstream racialized students feel subjugated by the dominant nature of white mainstream Canadian students, their sense of belonging is likely affected. The findings of this study suggested that the dominant culture can put pressure on non-mainstream racialized students to adapt to learning activities in a manner that aligns with the norms of mainstream Canadian students, particularly those deemed acceptable within the white community. In this regard, Loren suggested that interaction with mainstream white students was good enough as long as these norms were maintained: "If you interact in what they're comfortable with, the box of dispassionate, softening your opinion, not being direct, not being very assertive as to what you think, then they're fine with it."

In addition to this, John shared,

> You engage in the group activities with domestic students and how they're feeling that they want to be in charge of the group activity, which means that I need to follow the instructions, although I can offer some suggestions from my perspective. Yeah, in most cases, I need to follow their instructions to finish the group assignment.

For some students, such as Pari, the findings also suggested that focusing solely on racial identity while overlooking its intersection with sexual identity can create additional challenges for academic success in a colonial context, such as the mainstream white Canadian society. This

highlights one dimension of the broader impact of navigating a marginalized identity in such environments. As Pari perceived, “I think in terms of the broader colonial society, in terms of like [a] career in academia, I definitely feel that my racialized identity will be more of a hindrance or an obstruction to my success.”

This sub-theme applies to barriers to safe space as well. The findings showed that the natural flow of racialized students’ contributions to knowledge production (and thus their demonstration of their epistemic agency) can be obstructed by the dominant identities of the class since racialized students stand out and, it is difficult for their identities to prevail. To this point, Hossain narrated,

> I think the situation itself was not welcoming for us. And we couldn’t, like, explore ourselves and contribute. No space is seen when the students of colour, racialized us, cannot contribute due to this dominance of the white students that creates a glass ceiling, invisible bar. So, this part was also blocked, I would say, since I couldn’t explore myself, since I couldn’t contribute. So, this channel was blocked, the channel of comparing the intellectual capacity of the racial students and the Canadian students were completely blocked due to their dominant engagement.

Under this sub-theme, the study indicates how inclusive pedagogy can also be impacted by the dominating attitudes of peers, particularly those who are Caucasian, which can substantially impede the ability of racialized students to access equal learning opportunities, especially while both parties are involved in collaborative learning activities. As Albert’s articulation revealed,

> When you meet them [Caucasian students] for group assignment, they always want to impose their ideas. But it’s unfortunate that when you give them the opportunity, you go

> and you get the lowest mark because sometimes they don't even understand what is being done. And they are not willing to also take your opinion on that. So, if you're not fair to let them know that this is what is expected of us, this is what we're supposed to do, this is the idea that we're supposed to share, you may get the lowest mark, because of the way we understand what has been happening, but because of maybe your race, they try to downplay or undermine your intelligence. And they want to impose their ideas on you.

The findings show that the perceived dominance of white mainstream Canadian students in collaborative learning environments may lead to the marginalization of non-mainstream racialized students, hindering their sense of belonging, obstructing their epistemic contributions, and negatively impacting their educational experience by creating barriers to inclusive pedagogy and equal learning opportunities.

Global Minds, Local Focus: Excessive Canadian Learning Context

Participants' narratives revealed a recurring perception that the perspectives of the host country dominated classroom discussions and activities. While this focus may align with course objectives, students from non-mainstream backgrounds often encounter challenges in integrating their unique experiences and viewpoints into the learning process. This perceived imbalance can contribute to feelings of exclusion and disconnection, affecting their overall sense of belonging within the classroom environment. John, for instance, articulated his difficulty in relating to discussions about Canada's K–12 education system, a context unfamiliar to him:

> The class talks too much about the K–12 education here in Canada, but I do not have K–12 education in Canada. And I have very little background knowledge about them. So, I cannot relate and to understand their class activities and curriculum structures. And I find it very difficult for me to understand what they are talking about. Will this also fit me?

> Oh, this also left me feel difficult to have a conversation with them. I really want to communicate with them, to be honest, but I do have difficulties because I do not know how to start the conversation.

Similarly, other participants expressed that the predominant focus on Canadian contexts created barriers to their engagement and participation in knowledge-sharing. Rahi described how discussions were often dominated by white students, with little space for perspectives beyond the Canadian educational context:

> The discussions that we had through Zoom were very monopolized by the white students. Most of the topics that were discussed that were on education were only related to Canadian education. I expected to be more welcomed based on being one of the few persons who could bring a different perspective. I think it's just like, maybe not? I don't know—I feel that they [white Canadian students] probably just didn't accept things that were, like, outside of their comfort level or, like, maybe they haven't had—no, I don't know. It's very hard to express. I cannot find the words…so.

The emphasis on Canadian contexts was also evident in course materials, as Albert, a Ph.D. student in Social Work, noted,

> In many of the courses has always been the Canadian context, how things are being done in Canada. Because of this practice, it has always been—the examples have always been Canadian context, takes us Canadian context. Few articles will focus on outside of Canada, but many of them pay attention to the Canadian context. So, for example, if you give me an assignment, whatever comes normally, I use my country of origin examples from that area, develop my assignment, and it has always been meaningful in contributing to the discussion in the debate in class, because it also bring it up as identity.

> So, another piece too that brings me into the discussion is when we are talking about immigration, refugee and newcomer issues, of which is minimal when it comes to the content that we encounter.

Aarvi, a master's student in Natural Resource Management, similarly reflected on the focus of the curriculum, emphasizing that while Canadian examples were useful, broader and more globally relevant content could foster a greater sense of inclusion:

> In one course, it's full of Canadian examples and Canadian materials; it's all about Canadian concepts. When we, when we discuss the concept, they usually gave us Canadian examples. That was good, but I feel like if we—if they include something relevant for us, something relevant for other parts of the world, it would be great to understand the context. More better, then I feel like, yeah, I've been more included.

These accounts collectively suggest that the prioritization of host country perspectives in classrooms, while reflective of course priorities, may inadvertently marginalize the contributions of students from diverse backgrounds. For non-mainstream students, the predominance of Canadian examples and materials, coupled with the challenges of engaging in classroom discussions, may result in a sense of exclusion, complicating their integration into the classroom community.

Systemic Barriers: Trapped by Design

The findings suggest that, from the perspective of some participants, the current system likely poses challenges for certain students in terms of integration, expanding their learning, and availing themselves of opportunities. Several participants expressed that structural barriers within the system may hinder promotion of a sense of belonging. Specifically, they described how these barriers had affected their experiences in academic settings, particularly when they

encountered limitations on access to financial support or scholarships due to conditions perceived as unfair, such as those related to immigration status. As an example, Behzad, an international Ph.D. student in Physiology, shared his views on this issue:

> We haven't talked about the financial things. It's always important to just have specific, I mean, scholarships for international students. We don't have, as you know, many, or many other scholarships at the university are devoted to Canadians. Even we have some, but for example, if I want to apply for a CIHR,[2] or if you want to apply for SSHRC,[3] you are not, you're not eligible for because you are not Canadian, or you need to become permanent resident at least. That's the issue that that also makes me feel separated from and is kind of a bar to give opportunities and accepts opportunity.

Further to the systemic barrier, the study findings suggest that some students perceived their perspectives as being systemically silenced and/or excluded and that participants felt that, when pedagogy lacked inclusivity, it should be reconsidered in light of the journey these students had taken to advance their learning. Respecting this, Ayra, an immigrant Ph.D. student in Food and Nutrition, reported,

> Without concentration only Canada, we can globally think about the subject of projects that, like, represent our perspectives as well, okay. It's great. But on the other hand, we have things, like, okay, from where I get funds for my research for my stipend [Canada], and, like, I cannot develop the agriculture of my own country by getting the funds.

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[2] Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) is Canada's federal funding agency dedicated to health research, supporting projects that advance medical knowledge, improve healthcare systems, and promote public health initiatives.

[3] Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) is a federal research funding body that supports studies in the social sciences and humanities, including education, sociology, and cultural studies.
Both agencies provide grants and fellowships to researchers, fostering innovation and academic contributions within their respective fields.

> Because their focus is to develop the merit and, like, Manitoba, US agriculture. And so, that's how I am supposed to get funds.

The findings reveal that some participants perceived the systemic structures within academic institutions as excluding and marginalizing certain student populations, particularly international students, by limiting their access to financial support and presenting barriers to their sense of inclusion in academic settings to some extent.

Inclusive Pedagogy

Eurocentrism–Westernism: A Dissonant Experience of Teaching

Some participants felt that the current teaching practices are markedly influenced by Eurocentric and Western methods of imparting knowledge in terms of the learning context, content, approach, and teaching philosophy. Participants perceived that this problem is, to some extent, not limited to white teachers but also affects teachers from marginalized communities, who may encounter challenges in fully incorporating inclusivity within their teaching practices. Pari, a Ph.D. student in Microbiology, explained,

> Sometimes the use of fillers and references to Western contexts—like books, movies, or even memes—often assumes that all students are familiar with them. I have seen an instructor behave immaturely by taunting an Asian student for not understanding the Narnia reference, as if such cultural knowledge is universally expected.

She also explained that instructors and professors from marginalized communities often resort to using Eurocentric examples, possibly as a result of their own experiences and trauma related to assimilating into the Canadian academic culture.

With a similar point of view, Loren, pursuing a Ph.D. in Education, expressed,

> In a very systematic way of teaching, we see the content also is fitting into this academic box. So, the way it's presented is one thing, but also, the content itself is constrained by the academic box that it's put in. Yeah, that means most of the times, we are referred to read articles that are written or developed by the Canadian scholars or the Western but Eurocentric scholars, right.

Some participants perceived current teaching practices as being noticeably influenced by Eurocentric and Western methodologies, which, in their view, might contribute to insufficient inclusivity in pedagogical approaches. They suggested that, even among instructors from marginalized communities, the frequent use of Western cultural references and academic content can marginalize students who are less familiar with these contexts.

Navigational Strategies and Anti-Hegemonic Practices

With this theme, this section aims to explore how students utilized navigational strategies and anti-hegemonic practices to promote their sense of belonging, safe space, and inclusive pedagogy. As such, the factors that contribute to these strategies and practices are consolidated to depict them more fully. These factors were derived from participants' perspectives and reflect the means students used to develop their sense of belonging and safe space as well as what the ways in which they pulled themselves up by their own bootstraps to practice inclusive pedagogy in the classroom. The section first brings up the sense of belonging and safe space, and then discusses inclusive pedagogy.

Sense of Belonging and Safe Space

Personal/Individual Traits Matter

This overarching sub-theme encapsulates several underlying factors, such as being assertive, considering obstacles as opportunities, avoiding and discounting experiences, taking

challenges as chances to learn, and disclosure of self-disposition. These factors, all together, account for how an individual, by dint of personal traits, can respond to any situation that likely impacts their sense of belonging and safe space. A confident tone is heard in the voice of Pari, who asserted,

> I'm a person who's like more confident and have leadership capabilities. So, I've always been kind of at the forefront of things and trying to lead. I'm very confident in this aspect [sense of belonging]. So, I feel like, because of this confidence, I'm in a position of privilege with respect to other racialized people; because of this, like an individual trait of mine, I do not have to go through the same issues with confidence or self-esteem.

Under this sub-theme, the findings indicate that, in certain instances, non-mainstream students perceived the need to adopt a more assertive posture to align with the norms for discussion that mainstream white students followed. This adoption could assert the non-mainstream students' presence and demonstrate their competencies within the group. Although this strategy was culturally challenging for students who were not used to cutting off other people's speech, it was perceived as an effective way to chime in to the conversation with their thoughts where appropriate, so no one could dominate the discussion. Several participants felt that this strategy also allowed students to reconstruct the norms the white-dominant students presented in the classroom. For example, Bela shared her experiences in her account:

> The strategy I use to express, try to add up some of my thoughts, right?—try to jump in. The teacher would say, Oh, just feel free to jump in if you get some more by thoughts or ideas or something like that. But it's kind of hard—the impolite—not to listen to someone, right? So usually, we will not stop them. But the thing is, if you just let someone speaking, and maybe he or she will continue for the whole class. So, we never

> get a chance to speak to express our ideas, right? So, it's cutting off, it's kind of hard, is more about more about a cultural thing, right?

Likewise, participants felt that students have a crucial role in fostering a safe learning environment as both a responsibility and a right of the learning community. This role involves students' learning to confront and overcome challenging situations as a valuable part of their educational experience while also ensuring they can do so in a respectful manner that protects their agency and prevents anyone from dominating the learning space. As articulated by Aarvi,

> What we need to do, like, for safe space, is we have to just open up without being shy or afraid of judged by others. We just to take challenges, whatever comes in our learning and development. We need to face them instead of, like, going backward. I think this is a good way, if we start asks questions and take the challenges, like, "Why they think so?", "Why they say so?" and so on, then we will gradually have a better understanding of issues between us and them [white students]. So, we can realize what makes our space unsafe. And all these should be happened in a respectful learning manner.

This study indicates that some students opted for avoidance as a coping strategy to alleviate the negative impact of stressors on their sense of belonging. Albert's perspective denotes this:

> Avoidance has been one of my coping strategies. Avoided, so avoidance, where I think that I do not belong, avoided—I don't go there at all. So, I am the type, except that things contributed immensely to my academic activities, that I have no choice, I have no option. If I look at it, the place or the spirit that I'm going, and I think that I will not belong, I do not go there at all. I avoid going there. So, yes, avoidance has been one of my coping strategies.

He also included another strategy, in particular, diverting the conversation if something came up that might hinder the development of his sense of belonging. As he said,

> The second thing that sometimes I do is that if I feel I do not belong, I also tried to divert the conversation. Yes, I will be smart in trying to divert the conversation to a space that I also think I will belong or to the conversation that I think I can also contribute to it.

For maintaining safe space, the findings also suggest that students may preemptively express their passion for a topic, asking others not to misinterpret their facial expressions or tone of voice. This approach can help to ensure that their peers do not feel concerned or uncomfortable, fostering a more inclusive and understanding environment. Loren recounted her experience:

> When I found myself participating in a way my peers did not, in a very passionate, intense way, I would say to my classmates, "You know"—often when I speak like this, with such passion, they think I'm upset or angry—"I just want you to know, this is just the way I talk. I'm just passionate about this topic. So, I just wanted to let you know that so you're not worried. So, I just want you to know, it's the way I communicate."

This section highlights how personal traits, such as assertiveness, confidence, and resilience, can play a crucial role in shaping individuals' sense of belonging and their ability to navigate challenging environments. The findings suggest that some students employed strategies like assertive participation or avoidance to maintain a sense of safety and inclusion in their academic journey.

Commonality: United in Difference

The findings suggest that commonality generates a sense of belonging among the various demographics of a student body. Seeking out commonality, therefore, becomes a navigational

strategy when sense of belonging is distorted. This occurs when students in a diverse setting reach a mutual understanding grounded in shared values and identity markers and feel comfortable exchanging thoughts and experiences. This strategy can be beneficial for students seeking a space of commonality by allowing them to create and find sanctuaries among other racialized people in order to grow and uphold their sense of belonging in a dominant setting. Albert, for example, shared,

> I have people from my ethnic background that I can speak to, and I talk to, anytime I need support and assistance, and I'm able to share my cultural values because of the commonality that exists between us. And within the classroom settings too, I feel included because at some point, I am allowed to share experiences from my country of origin, and other places that I have been.

Rahi also shared her similar experience:

> Probably just the relationship I got to form with this other two international students. We continue talking even outside of class. So, their company helped me a lot. That was what made me feel better about the class. Along the way, I felt they were more welcoming, more receptive. Probably, many of us were going through very similar situations, for example, many of us, if not, like, the majority of us, were women, married women, with little children. So, all those things actually helped us to understand what the other ones were living. I think making connections with other students who have the same experiences, that are also interested in getting along, eventually improves things when students like us that especially feel excluded and do not belong in a dominant space.

Additionally, Loren's perception attested that, among a diverse student body, particularly among non-mainstream or racialized students, there exists a mutual understanding often lacking among

mainstream white students. Non-mainstream or racialized students sharing broader cultural and regional commonalities tend to be more open and supportive of one another, showing interest in each other's life experiences and encouraging the exchange of worldviews as a way to navigate and foster a sense of belonging.

The findings suggest that a shared sense of commonality among students from diverse demographics can contribute to a stronger sense of belonging. This shared understanding may enable students to create supportive spaces and build connections with peers who are able to share similar values and experiences, helping them navigate and sustain their sense of belonging within environments that may sometimes feel exclusionary.

Breaking Barriers: The Power of Open Communication

Establishing effective communication channels is vital when dealing with factors that may potentially impact students' sense of belonging in their learning environment. Therefore, developing and implementing strategies that promote effective communication and collaboration between teachers, support staff, and students can be imperative to ensure a positive and inclusive learning environment for all. In relation to this, Aarvi reported,

> One of the basic instruction they [teachers] gave us at the beginning of the course is you have to communicate. They emphasized on it: communicate, communicate, communicate. If you have a problem, if you have some concern, if you have something to say, please communicate because if you don't communicate, we don't know you have a problem. If you don't communicate, how we can help you? They emphasize the thing, the communication. Then we are not scared, or we are not hesitated to communicate. We know they are willing to receive our questions, so willing to help us. That made me very comfortable.

In this study, communication also appeared to be a key strategic way to navigate unsafe situations; it diffused students' oppressed feelings and let them out of their hearts. Therefore, being open and communicating with good peers, professors/advisors, and even the administrative staff was perceived as helpful. From her perspective, Zara narrated,

> If you feel unsafe, or if you have some problem about the safe space or belonging, firstly, I think we have to communicate. You have to communicate with others. If you have a very good peer friend, you can communicate with him, or if we can communicate with our professor advisor or administrative staff. Communication is key. Because sometimes if we feel neglected, or we feel unsafe, but they don't know about our feelings, if we communicate, then they can help us.

Pari, in her account, stated how being open can be effective when the situation is unsafe:

> We need to initiate a space to communicate, like with our peers or colleagues, because they might not be able to stand up to your situation. But if those things are expressed to a person who is in a position of confidence or power, then they can take that agenda forward and engage in this those conversations on their behalf. Because we need to step up for our peers and colleagues as well and create that space where they voluntarily come to us to share what's going on with them.

Communicating as a navigational strategy and anti-hegemonic practice can also help the student to reach out to teachers to discuss and solve issues regarding the learning and integration process of the learning system. As per John's narration,

> I ask questions during office hours with the professor, if I have any confusion about class assignment, about class activities. I share my perspective first. And I also share my background with the professor. And I ask the question sometimes; if the professor does

> not understand my situation, I will explain more about the reason why and how the difficulty. Maybe it is due to the different cultural background, and maybe it is due to the language barrier. And I will share the reason first. Then, I try to find a solution with professor.

However, a limitation of this strategy is its potential inability to adequately address students' specific needs, even when they seek support from external units, such as the international center or academic learning center, outside their faculty or department. In this case, John also recounted,

> The program I'm currently taking, I do not have a tutor. If I have questions, I can just connect with the writing tutor in the Academic Learning Center. And that is also the professor asked me to do that, to connect to work with a tutor in the Academic Learning Center, but you know, the tutor is also a student with a different background. They are they are not a student in education. Sometimes they are also a white person, and they really do not understand how difficult is in the classroom for us.

Participants in this study perceived that establishing open and effective communication channels was crucial for fostering a positive and inclusive learning environment. Such channels allowed students to express their concerns and seek support, which might help alleviate feelings of neglect and insecurity. However, while communication with professors and peers could facilitate understanding and problem-solving, engaging with external support services might not always be effective, as the people offering such services might lack the contextual understanding necessary to address students' challenges fully.

Students' Steering of the Ship: Navigational Capital

Students' roles in providing support and cooperation were perceived to be integral in the process of developing a sense of belonging and advancing safe space experiences, and this assistance came from students' immediate interactional partners—their peers. However, obtaining support and fostering cooperation among students was neither always a straightforward nor an equitable process; instead, it often unfolded unevenly, with certain students having the experience of getting more benefit from this support compared to others. As Behzad noted,

> I am getting support from my white peers, my white partner, so that that helped me to feel belonged. They are very collaborative and cooperative as well. And they helped me a lot—still they are helping me, especially my lab members. And they are always trying to helping me and let's listening to my voices and concerns.

Similarly, Zara also included, "Peers are really cooperative and get along well. No one thinks my female identity or international status is a less powerful to get a job done and communicate."

According to the findings, however, this was not what often happened in every faculty, department, lab, or classroom. In relation to this, Hossain reported,

> My racialized friends in the classroom are very much cooperative as peers, but like, well, for the white Canadian students, I didn't find them that much, like, welcoming. So, we had to always approach to themselves, okay. So, they always try to create some sort of, like, barrier or like wall around themselves, okay, and that the hard shell was difficult to break.

Albert provided an explanation of the tone that often underpinned his interaction with white peers, articulating that "to some extent, [white] peers apparently look cooperative, but they don't

want to go deeper to understand international, immigrant, or racialized students' perspectives; rather, they prefer to have a surface-level understanding."

Regardless of this disproportionate support and cooperation from peers with different demographics, students still believed that their roles could significantly influence their navigational journey in terms of coping with negative experiences related to their sense of belonging and safe space. The findings suggest that students can organize different kinds of social gatherings, group chats, and/or social networking, regardless of their department's support. Such initiatives can make students feel welcome and help promote a sense of belonging. Robert, in favor of this, shared his experience:

> We organized one [social gathering], and, as a result, the group is very tight and get a chance to understand a bit more of the culture side of things. So, less academic, but more on the human element, even meeting some families and those types of things.

Several participants described "fitting into the system" as a key strategy for navigating and enhancing their sense of belonging. This strategy, however, was perceived to involve compromising aspects of the students' authentic selves and core values, regardless of whether it aligns with their broader goals of academic assimilation. In contrast, some participants choose to engage with and learn about Canadian educational culture without altering their identities, seeking integration through understanding rather than self-modification.

Najib brought up his perspective:

> I've tried everything to fit in. I've tried to look my accent, I've tried to give up my culture, I've tried to mingle, I've tried to integrate, I've tried to—whatever that word even means. And slowly, I started looking in the mirror, and I'm like, Who am I anymore? And it hit me: I can never be accepted in this system. Unless I give up my

> culture, I gather my language, and ideally, my accent [do not forget about that]. And even then, I can never be truly accepted. I might be tolerated but not accepted.

Meanwhile Rahi, from her perspective, narrated,

> The only thing that I probably did was start reading more about the Canadian system. So, I was able to understand better their discussions because, when they were talking about very particular things, it was hard for me—like, when they were talking about things they are implementing at their schools, I didn't have any idea since I have not studied the Canadian curriculum. All the things that they are doing, with the reconciliation programs that they are doing, like those were completely new for me, so I just tried to inform myself better. So, I was able to understand what they were discussing. But at any point, I didn't consider changing something for me to fit better in the educational culture and system.

In line with developing a sense of belonging, it is also possible for a person to make others feel a sense of care and value by replying to their thoughts, opinions, and perspectives. For example, in an online learning discussion forum, one can reply to the comments of others who do not get any or only a few answers, so that they can feel they are counted. This was shown by the experience of Rahi, who shared what she used to do:

> So, my strategy there was before, like, I would submit my answer, and then I would go and try to find those with no answers, and I would reply to them, so they feel that at least one person read what they had to say, that there was at least one person interested on what they were saying. Because when you don't receive any replies, you don't really know if somebody read it, right? At least when you're speaking in a group, you have the sense that even if they didn't pay attention, they heard what you were saying.

She also emphasized the importance of students' roles in fostering a sense of belonging by suggesting that students can contribute in various ways. She highlighted that welcoming others is a key approach, as well as speaking up when witnessing inappropriate situations. While acknowledging the difficulty of defending others and finding the courage to speak out, Rahi also stressed the value of respecting and acknowledging others' perspectives and taking initiative to make those who feel unwelcome more included.

Regarding such a strategic tool, some participants felt that they had to open up by raising their voices to maintain safe space as well. As such, Hossain asserted, "Students should raise their voices and boldly offer an open conversation with the students who cause disruption and try to intentionally or unintentionally degrade us, students like coloured people." In addition, he advocated for a sense of security as a potential factor that could facilitate navigation of unsafe space. He explained that a sense of security in his surroundings, along with smooth interactions, allowed him to express his opinions and views without fear. He further emphasized that when his peers, regardless of their identities, respected his thoughts and ideas without interruption, he felt safe and comfortable contributing to the environment.

In addition to this, Robert opined on how students can deal with unsafe spaces in classroom settings:

> Every student has a responsibility, especially at the, at the graduate level to, to address, so address, if you see something that is not correct, it's your responsibility to do your best to correct it. If you think there's something unsafe, or you're being singled out, then you would speak to the group, you can speak to the individual, you can speak to the professor, or you can even go higher, to the faculty. So, I think all of that is clear.

Last but not least, the results of the study indicate that, to maintain a sense of belonging and safe space, immigrant and international students who are categorized by race can actively resist the established norms, consistently confront the institutional barriers, and persistently challenge the environment that might fall short of reflecting the experiences and perspectives of underrepresented groups. Najib expressed the following from his perspective:

> Just keep challenging status quo, you just keep challenging systems, you keep challenging systematic racism, you keep challenging how the things exist that do not represent you. And that's a hard life to live; that's a very draining job. Because anything that requires change, it will require creation of spaces to reflect. For example, in the work that I have been doing in my own Ph.D., would be great to have courses that are dealt with conflicts around the world that are taught by people from those complex roles. I'd like to see that representative teaching staff, diverse teaching staff that represent the needs of the growing diverse communities that we live in.

The role of students' navigational capital is perceived as critical in fostering a sense of belonging and creating safe spaces within educational environments. While support from peers is often unevenly distributed, students' proactive initiatives, such as organizing social gatherings and addressing issues of exclusion, can significantly contribute to navigating and mitigating negative experiences related to belonging, particularly for immigrant and international students.

Inclusive Pedagogy

From Acceptance to Action: Embracing Responsibility

The participants perceived themselves as proactive in navigating less inclusive pedagogical instances, demonstrating an active commitment to inclusive practices. This included voluntarily taking on responsibilities such as group formation and leadership in collaborative

work when necessary. They perceived this process as an advancement of inclusive pedagogy, as they sought to achieve the most favorable and desired learning outcome. In this regard, John mentioned that reflective classroom activities make the students feel comfortable. As he asserted,

> In many classes, we have reflection activities, which means that I can connect that class readings with my own professional experience, and it is where I feel safe to share my perspectives because it is a reflection based on my own experience.

In addition, John suggested that if the formation of groups with diverse students caused discomfort for any student, they should communicate with their professor so that they could potentially change groups or complete the assignment individually. With regard to such group formation for class activities, participants thought that students could assume responsibility for navigating these situations in instances where inclusivity was perceived to be lacking in the learning process. To this point, Albert shared,

> So, for peers [Caucasians], I have always not a good cooperation when it comes to working on assignment group presentations and other style that you signed up. But what has always helped is that, when I am working with them inside groups, we ensure that we divide the task so that everybody will focus on what is expected on us.

The findings suggest that students were proactive in navigating what they perceived to be less inclusive in pedagogical practices by taking on responsibilities such as group formation and leadership, utilizing reflective classroom activities to connect personal experiences with course content, and advocating for inclusivity in educational environments.

Overall, this chapter has provided an examination of the participants' perceptions and experiences regarding sense of belonging, safe space, and inclusive pedagogy. It has discussed various experiences that either hindered or promoted their sense of belonging, safe space, and

inclusive pedagogy, as well as how they navigated these situations, while considering their intersectionality. Additionally, the participants reported on the university's efforts to support their academic lives and offered suggestions for improvement. They emphasized the importance of considering sense of belonging, safe space, and inclusive pedagogy when advancing EDI approaches and practices at the university. The following chapter will explore these findings further in relation to the research questions.

Chapter Five

Discussion and Implications

Introduction

This chapter presents a discussion of the research findings, connecting them to established theoretical frameworks such as CRT, the theory of student integration and engagement, validation theory, and ecological systems theory. The analysis delves into the experiences of racialized immigrant and racialized international students at the University of Manitoba (UM), specifically focusing on their sense of belonging, safety, and inclusive pedagogy. The goal of this chapter is to contextualize these experiences within the broader discourse on EDI, emphasizing how this marginalized group of students' belongingness, epistemic and emotional safety, agency, and spaces of empowerment are being impacted.

The findings emphasize the multifaceted nature of the exclusion that racialized immigrant and racialized international students encounter, encompassing aspects from microaggression, cultural dissonance in pedagogical practice, and reductive Eurocentric representation in curricula to social and academic marginalization. This chapter merges empirical evidence with theoretical insights to underscore how these experiences influence students' ability to engage in their academic and social environments meaningfully. It reflects on how these dynamics intersect with issues of race, culture, language, and identity, examining these students' lived experiences and challenging existing theoretical models of student integration by illustrating the difficulties of their academic integration in foreign educational settings and the limitations of frameworks amid the structural inequities inherent in HE.

Additionally, this chapter explores the implications of these findings for EDI initiatives within universities. By linking participants' real-life experiences to institutional efforts, it

advocates for comprehensive and transformative strategies that could potentially enhance institutional capacity to advance a more inclusive environment for learning communities. This chapter also calls for amplifying the voices and experiences of racialized immigrant and racialized international graduate students to foster a sense of belonging, ensure safe spaces, and promote an inclusive pedagogical environment that values the diverse identities and lived experiences of all students. Through this analysis, the chapter illuminates pathways to enhance the visibility of underrepresented voices in HE, offering insights that may potentially contribute to advancing EDI. By emphasizing the importance of understanding and addressing the root causes of non-belonging experienced by these students and examining classroom spaces that often constrain their agency, this study aims to foster an environment that nurtures authentic belonging and supports their academic success.

Critical Analysis of Study Findings

Experiences of Exclusion and Belonging

One of the most prevalent themes in the findings is the persistent sense of exclusion experienced by racialized immigrant and racialized international students within academic and social spaces. Participants reported feeling alienated in classrooms where the learning content predominantly focused on the Canadian context and where pedagogical spaces, practices, and perspectives were, to an extent, shaped by students from the dominant group. This reflects the concept of whiteness as property (Harris, 1995), which asserts that whiteness functions as a form of capital, conferring intangible benefits—such as the assumed legitimacy of white cultural norms, authority in discourse, and unchallenged dominance in shaping educational environments. Within HE, whiteness is embedded in curricula and pedagogical approaches that privilege Western perspectives, reinforcing systemic advantages for white students (McCoy &

Rodricks, 2015; Patton et al., 2007). These structural biases marginalize students whose knowledge systems and cultural perspectives do not align with dominant narratives, often rendering their contributions secondary or invisible. Whiteness is deeply embedded in educational systems and often goes unrecognized, despite its significant influence on institutional efforts toward educational equity for racialized students (Leonardo, 2013). For instance, several participants recounted instances of being talked over or overshadowed in class discussions when attempting to share perspectives rooted in their own racial or cultural backgrounds. John, an international Ph.D. student from China, described a classroom experience in which discussions were monopolized by Canadian perspectives, making it difficult for him to engage meaningfully or contribute insights from his own cultural and academic background. This exclusion from knowledge production and validation demonstrates how whiteness operates as property in academic spaces, where access to intellectual authority and participation is often restricted to those aligned with dominant cultural norms. The emphasis on Canadian content, irrespective of course objectives, created barriers for John in his learning, reinforcing a systemic pattern in which certain students are continuously positioned outside the margins of educational discourse (Brunette-Debassige et al., 2022). Despite institutional commitments to equity, whiteness remains an implicit structure that dictates whose knowledge is prioritized, shaping the broader educational experience of racialized students.

However, this analysis warrants further problematization. For example, faculty in disciplines such as social work may naturally prioritize Canadian-specific issues, such as the foster care system, due to their professional focus. Similarly, other faculties may design courses that emphasize Canadian content because it aligns with local practices or is essential for their field. In such cases, the focus on Canadian perspectives may not inherently exclude other voices

but could instead reflect the pragmatic requirements of the discipline. Academic programs are often structured to equip students with the knowledge and competencies necessary for professional practice within a specific national or regional context. For instance, social work education in Canada is expected to prepare students to engage with Canadian policies, legal frameworks, and social systems, just as engineering programs may emphasize local regulations and environmental considerations. In these instances, the prioritization of Canadian perspectives serves a functional purpose, ensuring that students gain the requisite expertise to succeed in their respective professions. However, this does not preclude the possibility that such curricular structures, if left unexamined, may inadvertently marginalize global perspectives and diverse epistemologies, reinforcing a narrow, nationally centered worldview. In this study, participants' feelings of alienation suggest that the pervasive reliance on Canadian content may unintentionally marginalize international or immigrant students who lack familiarity with the context. This marginalization could be the result of several intersecting factors, including cultural shock and a lack of familiarity with the dominant knowledge systems or broader Eurocentric approaches embedded in the curriculum and pedagogy. These intersecting factors may have compounded the sense of exclusion experienced by racialized immigrant and racialized international students in this study, even in contexts where the emphasis on Canadian content might otherwise be warranted. As outlined in Solórzano and Yosso's (2002) work on CRT, such exclusionary practices contribute to the reproduction of inequities by privileging dominant voices and silencing marginalized perspectives. This analysis suggests that, while whiteness operates as a hegemonic tool allowing dominant groups to marginalize racialized voices (Ladson-Billings, 2013). There is also a need to critically examine how institutional structures, disciplinary goals, and pedagogical practices intersect to shape students' experiences of

exclusion and belonging. Thus, the question arises: How can institutions balance the inclusion of diverse perspectives with the practical need to address local or disciplinary priorities?

The sense of exclusion extended beyond class discussions to group projects and peer interactions. Participants described being left out of group activities or not being invited to collaborate with other students during assignments. Albert, an African international student, recounted his experience during a group project where his white peers consistently ignored his suggestions. He explained that he felt "like an outsider in [his] own classroom." Other participants, such as Hossain and John, shared similar experiences of exclusion tendencies; these were not only observed in group work but also in instances when students' attempts to approach the class teacher were disrupted by white peers without justification—a experience that reflects the othering process described in the literature on marginalization and academic exclusion (Powel & Menandian, 2016). The othering process, as theorized by Powell and Menendian (2016), refers to the systemic and structural dynamics through which certain individuals or groups are cast as outsiders, effectively denying them full inclusion within a community or institution. This process operates through implicit biases, cultural norms, and institutional practices that center dominant group identities while relegating others to the periphery. In the context of academic spaces, this can manifest as the dismissal of contributions from marginalized students, the assumption of their intellectual inferiority, or the tacit reinforcement of social hierarchies within collaborative activities. For Albert, the repeated neglect of his input not only underscored his peers' disregard for his perspectives but also perpetuated the invisible boundaries that defined him as an outsider within the academic community. According to the participants, the emotional toll of such experiences was profound since the feeling of being systematically excluded from group activities reinforced a sense of alienation, amplifying their

perception of non-belonging and eroding their motivation to engage actively in their academic endeavors.

In line with Tinto's (1993) theory of student integration, students who feel excluded or marginalized within their academic environments are less likely to succeed or persist. However, the participants in this study illuminated the complexity of this marginalizing process. For them, integration was not simply about adjusting to new academic norms or routines. Instead, it involved a more complicated and often fraught process of negotiating their identities within environments perceived to prioritize dominant cultural norms. Integration, as it was experienced by these students, appeared to demand conformity to the dominant academic culture—an expectation that did not meaningfully account for the diverse identities, cultural practices, and lived experiences they brought with them. Thus, rather than fostering identity congruence—a sense of alignment and authenticity between students' personal identities and their academic environments—this form of integration often required students to downplay or suppress aspects of themselves to "fit in." Najib reflected on his experiences of struggling to fit into a system that demands cultural assimilation. He shared a sense of losing his identity, questioning, "Who am I anymore?" Najib felt that true acceptance in this system was unattainable without sacrificing his culture or even developing his English language proficiency and accent. He perceived that he might only be tolerated, not genuinely accepted, even if he met these expectations. According to the findings, this study thus critiques the assumption in Tinto's model that integration is universally beneficial or sufficient for student success—an outcome referring to a student's ability to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally within the higher education system that is often narrowly defined by conformity to dominant norms. It highlights how Tinto's framework inadequately addresses the racialized and cultural dimensions of academic spaces that complicate

integration for marginalized students. The findings suggest that when integration entails sacrificing one's identity, it not only places an undue burden on students of colour but also risks perpetuating systemic inequities by privileging assimilation over genuine inclusion. To move beyond the limitations of Tinto's model, it is necessary to ask: What would integration look like if it were redefined to center identity congruence, allowing students to bring their full selves into academic spaces without the expectation of assimilation? How might institutions reconceptualize integration to ensure that it is a mutual process—one that involves adapting institutional practices to embrace diversity rather than solely expecting students to conform to existing norms? These questions underscore the need for a more nuanced understanding of integration that prioritizes belonging through inclusivity and equity.

Intersectionality and Identity: Navigating Multiple Forms of Disadvantage

Participants' experiences were further complicated by the intersectionality of their identities. Many students in the study identified not only as racialized individuals but also as members of other marginalized groups, including women, 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals, and first-generation immigrants. These intersecting identities, as noted by the participants, contributed to unique challenges and barriers in academic settings, underscoring the need for educational frameworks to acknowledge and address the complexity of such experiences.

A notable account from Pari, an international student from India, detailed how her race, gender, and sexual orientation exposed her to multiple layers of discrimination. She shared a classroom scenario where Western cultural references appeared to eclipse another frame of reference, leaving her and other international students feeling excluded. As she observed, she had encountered an instructor who displayed immature behavior by taunting Asian students for not understanding the Narnia context. She further reflected that, as a person of colour and a queer

individual, her experiences were more likely to be overshadowed by those of a white female instructor. This finding highlights a likely concern within the curriculum and how it is practiced, which has been noted for its intentional or unintentional manifestation of microaggression and Eurocentricism and Western frameworks, potentially creating a disconnect for students from diverse cultural backgrounds (Zembylas, 2018). While Pari's experience highlights critical issues of microaggressions and the dominance of Eurocentric frameworks in academic spaces, this analysis could benefit from further contextualization, particularly regarding the content and examples employed in classroom interactions. For disciplines such as the sciences, where the curriculum often involves universally applicable concepts, there is a need to reflect on how pedagogical practices can either reinforce or disrupt cultural exclusion. Western cultural references like *The Chronicles of Narnia* may resonate with some students but risk alienating those unfamiliar with such contexts, regardless of their diverse identities. While the focus on Eurocentricism is significant, it is equally important to consider how the intersectionality of students' identities—such as Pari's overlapping experiences of race, gender, and sexual orientation—interacts with these exclusionary practices. This experience aligns with Crenshaw's (1995) theory of intersectionality, which emphasizes that marginalized individuals often face compounded forms of oppression that are not adequately addressed by single-axis frameworks like feminism or anti-racism alone.

Again, Pari described how her sexual orientation and racial identity intersected to make her feel particularly vulnerable in classroom settings. She recounted instances of both homophobic and racially insensitive remarks from peers—especially those belonging to subcontinent backgrounds—that went unchecked by instructors. Whether intentional or not, these remarks contributed to the participant's perceived social identity threat as she constantly

questioned whether she was accepted or valued in academic spaces because of the interplay of race and sexuality. An identity threat of this nature may lead to heightened physiological and cognitive vigilance toward the perceived threat rather than a focus on academic and daily-life activities, alongside diminished feelings of belonging and reduced interest in participation (Spencer et al., 2016). These feelings intensified Pari's uncertainty, as her racial identity might present additional challenges to achieving success in an academic career within mainstream white Canadian society, while her sexual identity allowed her acceptance in 2SLGBTQIA+ spaces, which, ironically, are also predominantly white. This instance resonates with West's (2024) discussion of the complex challenges LGBTQ+ international students face as they navigate intersecting identity markers in predominantly white educational settings. In relation to this point, Pari's experience also highlights the importance of safe spaces in educational environments—spaces where students feel free to express their identities without fear of discrimination or exclusion. The literature on safe spaces (MacDonald, 2020) has emphasized the need for environments that protect students, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds, from emotional and psychological harm. However, participants in this study expressed that their classrooms, on different occasions, lacked the qualities necessary to be perceived as safe and supportive spaces. Instead, they felt these spaces to be hostile environments where their identities were questioned or invalidated. Reflecting on her first-year classes, Rahi realized that her opinions were not valued, particularly by her white Canadian peers. Despite being in a position to offer a unique perspective during classroom learning based on her diverse educational background, Rahi felt she needed to seek validation from her white peers because of her non-dominant identity. This finding presents two complementary insights: first, it highlights the role of peers as validating agents for marginalized students who offer essential affirmation that fosters

a sense of capability, self-worth, and recognition of prior knowledge as valuable, regardless of identity (Kelly et al., 2021). Second, it reveals that, in the absence of such validation, students experienced a lack of emotional and epistemic safety (Harless, 2018), which contributed to feelings of alienation and discouraged their full participation in academic activities. The absence of emotional and epistemic safety (Harless, 2018) in these classrooms contributed to the participants' overall sense of alienation and discouraged them from fully participating in academic activities.

Safe Space and Inclusive Pedagogy: Analyzing Emergent Shortcomings

The concept of safe spaces emerged as a critical theme in this study, with participants frequently expressing a desire for academic environments where they could engage in discussions without fear of being marginalized or attacked based on their identities. However, the findings suggest that safe spaces are often compromised in classrooms, particularly for racialized immigrant and racialized international students. This aligns with existing literature, which has criticized HEIs, despite their commitment to EDI principles, for the challenges they encounter as they face increasing diversity and must come to grips with inclusive environments (Tamtik & Guenter, 2019). For example, Pari described feeling unsafe in classroom discussions due to the lack of open conversation about uplifting and encouraging the voices of marginalized communities. Therefore, Pari envisioned a safe space wherein "me and my peers, who come from these very diverse intersectional backgrounds, can express themselves freely. And maybe people strive to have this very open conversational dialogue." Pari's statement highlights the call for maintaining safe, inclusive spaces in educational settings where individuals from diverse, intersectional backgrounds can freely express themselves, addressing her sense of vulnerability due to the absence of open dialogue that supports and empowers marginalized voices.

Participants repeatedly cited instances where peers from dominant backgrounds dismissed or devalued their contributions, creating an environment where they felt unsafe expressing their thoughts. Rahi, a racialized international student from South America, shared how her attempts to provide diverse perspectives in classroom discussions were often ignored while her white peers stuck to their own perspectives. In a similar context, Hasan, an immigrant Ph.D. student from Bangladesh, expressed that he felt unsafe when his intellectual ability to contribute to the class was, to some degree, restricted, and he experienced anxiety about potential confrontations with white Canadian students during exchanges of thoughts. Such experiences suggest that even when diversity is touted and EDI efforts are formally recognized, the presence of tokenism may persist. According to Mugo and Puplampu (2022), EDI-infused educational institutions often place undue emphasis on what is expected from institutional agents (i.e., students), rather than fully acknowledging and addressing the confrontations and systemic inequalities that prevail. They argued that meaningful progress in EDI requires reinforcing knowledge production by marginalized groups within safer and more inclusive learning environments. This tokenism is a recurring theme in the literature on cosmetic diversity (Henry et al., 2016), which argues that institutions often prioritize the appearance of diversity without addressing the deeper, systemic changes needed to better come to grips with inequality and champion EDI by creating inclusive learning environments.

The lack of safe spaces also impacted students' ability to engage with inclusive pedagogy, a teaching approach emphasizing the importance of addressing the diverse needs of all students (Florian & Beaton, 2018). Participants in this study at times felt that some instructors were ill-equipped to handle the nuance and complex issues that arose in pedagogical practice in relation to cultural differences within teaching–learning dynamics. For example, Loren, an immigrant

racialized student, perceived how inclusive pedagogy involves accommodating various and diverse representations of the content being delivered, characterizing it as a pedagogical approach that employs multiple methods of content delivery. However, she recalled, “We all present and participate in a very mainstream, standardized, neutral, quiet, dispassionate way, way that is comfortable to the mainstream domestic students, because that’s what they grew up with. But it’s foreign to many non-mainstream students.” Recognizing this conformity and validating the cultural differences of pedagogy can help teachers to facilitate the learning of non-mainstream racialized students, and a lack of inclusivity in pedagogical practice might have repercussions for EDI efforts. This finding is consistent with research by Sanger (2020a), who argued that inclusive pedagogy must excel in creating spaces where marginalized students feel both validated and well-recognized through endorsing their varied ways of learning, which may differ from how mainstream students are used to learning.

The analysis of safe spaces and inclusive pedagogy in this study revealed significant complexities that necessitate deeper critical examination. While participants underscored the importance of safe spaces as environments where diverse, intersectional identities can be expressed without fear, the findings highlight persistent challenges in realizing these spaces, particularly for racialized immigrant and racialized international students. These challenges raise questions about whether the concept of safe spaces, as constructed in HEIs, sufficiently addresses the lived realities of marginalized students. The frequent dismissal of contributions from racialized students, as described by Rahi and Hasan, underscores not only the failure to establish genuine inclusivity but also the persistence of tokenistic practices that prioritize the appearance of diversity over substantive change (Mugo & Puplampu, 2022). Furthermore, Loren’s account of cultural dissonance in pedagogical practices highlights a deeper tension: The demand for

conformity to dominant norms within classrooms often perpetuates exclusion rather than fosters inclusivity. This conformity suggests that the lack of safe spaces is not merely a result of oversight but reflects systemic inequities embedded within institutional structures and practices. The findings, therefore, raise critical concerns about whether the current framing of safe spaces and inclusive pedagogy sufficiently accounts for the intersectional and structural nature of marginalization, or whether these concepts inadvertently reproduce the same exclusions they aim to dismantle.

Impact on Sense of Belonging: Psychological and Behavioral Dimensions

Another significant theme that emerged from the study is the profound impact that such limiting experiences had on participants' sense of belonging. For racialized immigrant and racialized international students, a sense of belonging is closely tied to their ability to feel safe, respected, and valued within their academic communities. However, as the findings revealed, many participants perceived that their presence within the institution was insufficiently valued, and in academic spaces, it was primarily tolerated rather than actively welcomed, particularly by their white peers. This reflects the literature on belonging uncertainty (Walton & Cohen, 2007), which has highlighted how marginalized students often question whether they truly belong in academic settings due to the subtle and overt forms of exclusion they experience.

Participants described feeling like "outsiders" in both academic and social contexts. Rahi, a master's student originally from Latin America, explained how she felt that her presence was reduced to a token representation of diversity, rather than being fully integrated into the fabric of the academic community. She noted that while her university celebrated diversity through various public initiatives and events, these efforts did little to address the everyday realities of exclusion stemming from her preoccupation with being a mother with two kids, which made her

unable to participate in this celebration. This disconnect between institutional rhetoric and lived experience is a central theme in the literature on cosmetic diversity (Henry et al., 2016), where institutions adopt diversity measures criticized as surface-level without addressing the deeper issues that affect marginalized students' sense of belonging.

A deeper understanding of the role of belonging in academic success can be drawn from Strayhorn's (2019a) work, which emphasized that a student's sense of belonging is not merely a social need but a critical factor influencing academic engagement and persistence. In Strayhorn's (2019a) study, participants' experiences revealed how exclusionary practices eroded their sense of belonging, preventing them from engaging meaningfully in academic work. For instance, several participants in Strayhorn's study noted they had to exert significantly more effort than their white peers to be seen as credible in academic discussions, leading to increased stress, anxiety, and eventual burnout. This disproportionate effort not only reflected the systemic inequalities within academic environments but also illustrated the emotional labor demanded of marginalized students. In my study, the psychological toll of these experiences became evident as participants began to disengage from classroom activities and social interactions, mirroring other scholars' findings on chronic exclusion and its impact on individual behavior. Albert, an African student, described how repeated instances of being ignored in class discussions led him to stop raising his hand altogether. His withdrawal highlights the compounded effects of exclusion, where students internalize the hostility or indifference they encounter, leading to self-censorship and diminished participation. Such behaviors underscore the recursive nature of exclusion—as marginalized students withdraw, their absence from academic discourse reinforces the invisibility of their perspectives, perpetuating a cycle of disengagement. The findings of this study align with existing literature (Allen et al., 2021), demonstrating that a lack of belonging directly

impairs academic performance and engagement. Students who feel unsafe or excluded are less likely to participate actively, form meaningful peer relationships, or seek out opportunities for growth. As a result, a lack of belonging and perceived exclusion can significantly impact students' academic performance, engagement, and overall well-being. Reduced participation and disengagement may hinder knowledge acquisition, critical thinking development, and academic achievement, potentially leading to lower grades and higher attrition rates. Additionally, feelings of exclusion can contribute to emotional distress, including stress, anxiety, and diminished self-esteem, further impairing students' ability to succeed (Dean, 2023). Limited peer relationships and disengagement from campus activities may also restrict access to mentorship, networking, and professional opportunities, ultimately reinforcing systemic inequities within higher education. This suggests that fostering a true sense of belonging is not only crucial for individual well-being but also for cultivating a more equitable and participatory academic environment. The persistent disengagement of marginalized students, as revealed in this study, calls into question the efficacy of existing diversity and inclusion efforts, signaling the need for systemic changes that address the deeper structural barriers to academic participation.

Navigating the Barriers: Resilience and Coping Strategies

Despite the significant challenges they faced, participants in this study also demonstrated resilience in their efforts to navigate institutional power dynamics and create a sense of belonging for themselves. Many students described developing coping strategies to deal with the exclusion and marginalization they experienced. These strategies included seeking out supportive peers and self-censorship, where students chose to downplay or suppress aspects of their identity in order to fit into the dominant academic culture.

Rahi explained how she actively sought out affinity groups in academic settings, like micro spaces of solidarity, in order to find a sense of community and belonging by sharing cross-group understanding, recognizing shared values, and valuing each other's contributions. These affinity groups served as safe havens where participants could express their identities without fear of judgment or exclusion. This reflects Bronfenbrenner and Morris's ecological systems theory (2006), which highlights how students' microsystems—the immediate environments in which they interact—can have a significant impact on their sense of belonging and well-being. In this case, the microsystem of peer support served as a vital buffer against the exclusionary dynamics participants encountered in their classrooms, aligning with foundational principles of inclusion. These principles emphasize fostering cross-group understanding, encouraging meaningful interactions among diverse groups, recognizing shared values, and appreciating the unique contributions of each community member (Museus et al., 2016). Such an approach facilitates a transition from exclusionary practices to the development of integrative learning communities that constructively engage with differences. This shift holds particular significance for minoritized students, offering them spaces where their identities and contributions are both acknowledged and valued (Nasir & Vakil, 2017).

Another coping strategy described by participants was the adoption of "academic masks," where students downplayed their cultural identities or adopted the speech and behaviors of their white peers in order to blend in. Loren explained how she felt the need to conform to Western norms of classroom participation, such as speaking assertively and confidently, even when this felt at odds with her cultural upbringing. This form of code-switching—the practice of shifting between different cultural norms depending on the social context—was a common strategy among participants who felt that their authentic selves (Vaccaro & Newman, 2016) were not

fully accepted in academic spaces. However, as several students noted, this form of self-censorship came at a psychological cost, as it required them to suppress aspects of their identity in order to fit into a culture that did not fully value or respect their backgrounds.

Participants also reported relying on faculty support as a critical resource for navigating institutional challenges. Those with supportive relationships with faculty members felt more empowered to confront the exclusionary practices they encountered. These relationships were often developed through consistent and meaningful faculty engagement, such as mentoring, individualized feedback, and recognition of students' unique cultural and academic contributions. Informal conversations, encouragement during office hours, and faculty efforts to incorporate diverse perspectives into their teaching also played a role in fostering trust and connection. Ayra, originally from Sri Lanka, described how a professor who acknowledged her unique cultural perspective helped her feel validated in the classroom and even in their lab environment. As outlined in Rendón's (1994) validation theory, this form of validation played a crucial role in affirming students' sense of academic self-efficacy and belonging. When faculty took the time to recognize and support the diverse experiences of racialized students, participants felt more confident in their ability to succeed academically, despite the challenges they faced.

Connecting Findings to Theoretical Frameworks

CRT: Unveiling Structural Racism in Higher Education

CRT provides a foundational lens for understanding the experiences of racialized immigrant and racialized international students in higher education. This study's findings align with CRT's central tenet that racism is ingrained in the fabric of society, including educational institutions, where context-dependent practices and interactions continue to privilege white students over students of colour. Participants' experiences of exclusion, marginalization, and

racial stereotyping in classrooms reflect the permanence of racism (Bell, 1992), which CRT scholars have argued is not an aberration but a normal, systemic feature of social structures.

One of the key ways this study illustrates the permanence of racism is through the exclusion of non-white voices in academic discussions, primarily between students. Participants reported that their contributions appeared to be dismissed, especially when they introduced perspectives that challenged the dominant Eurocentric narrative. For instance, Najib, a Palestinian Ph.D. student, shared his experiences of discussing the struggles of being a racialized Muslim in Western academic settings. His contributions were met with indifference, and he felt that his insights into the impacts of disregarding someone's daily life struggle associated with their immigrant status and historical and demographic leveling were minimized by peers at large and by faculty to some extent. This reflects how whiteness as property (Harris, 1995) operates within the classroom, where the dominant voices in academic discourse often exclude or undermine non-white perspectives. The curriculum, likely framed within a Western lens, becomes a form of "intellectual property" controlled by white students and faculty, marginalizing those who attempt to introduce diverse viewpoints. The concept of whiteness as property further elucidates how racialized students are deprived of their right to academic participation and validation. Many participants (such as Albert, Rahi, Hossain, and John), particularly those from African and South Asian backgrounds, perceived that their voices were silenced in classes where white students and faculty monopolized discussions. These experiences reflect Harris's (1995) argument that whiteness confers privileges akin to property rights, allowing white individuals to control access to cultural capital, including the knowledge valued in academic spaces. CRT helps elucidate how these exclusionary dynamics perpetuate the racial hierarchy within higher education, leaving racialized students feeling marginalized and disempowered.

Counter-Storytelling and the Power of Narratives

Another important CRT tenet highlighted by the study is counter-storytelling, which emphasizes the power of marginalized groups to share their lived experiences as a means of challenging dominant narratives. In this study, several participants (e.g., Najib, Rahi, Hossain, Pari) actively engaged in counter-storytelling by sharing their experiences of racism, microaggressions, and exclusion in academic spaces. One international student, Pari, described how her experiences of subtle racial discrimination—such as being passed over for group projects—were often dismissed by faculty, who perceived these instances as misunderstandings rather than systemic issues. She underscored initiating counter-narratives to share the experiences she encountered, which could reinforce the facilitation of open dialogue to reach symbiotic solutions. This form of dismissal is not uncommon, as highlighted by Solórzano and Yosso (2002), who argued that counter-stories allow marginalized students to reclaim their narratives and bring attention to the subtle ways in which racism operates in everyday interactions. The findings suggest that, while participants attempted to use counter-storytelling to assert their perspectives, their efforts were often undermined by white fragility (DiAngelo, 2018), where white faculty and students were often dismissive when confronted with discussions of race. This dynamic further illustrates how everyday interactions, shaped by power imbalances, can perpetuate exclusion in academic spaces even when broader institutional structures are not explicitly implicated.

The power of narratives can play a crucial role if the academic space students inhabit is safe for expressing themselves freely, especially when it comes to discussing any sensitive topics within the spectrum of human dignity, to the limit of affording others' sentiments. Najib, for instance, when recounting his refugee, migration, and transitional history, emphasized that by

dint of freedom of speech, students should be able to talk about their identities, ethnicities, cultures, and experiences—even difficult or "bad" ones–in a classroom environment where their stories reinforced their positions and challenged the misinformed assumptions around them held by those in dominant societal positions. Thereby, their contributions could not only be respected but also others could critically engage with them to take stock of majoritarian stories as a part of shared learning. This instance reflects how safe space bolstered Najib's freedom of expression/speech at an intense point within a discussion, which suggests difficult conversations can challenge dominant narratives and encourage growth. I theorize such space as a ground of confrontation, drawing on the counter-storytelling tenet of CRT, which aims to dismantle and deconstruct majoritarian stories to protest race-related oppression. By fostering a dynamic where challenging conversations are welcomed rather than silenced, this space becomes a site of critical engagement, enabling participants to not only question entrenched biases but also collaboratively envision pathways toward a more equitable academic and social environment.

Intersectionality Unveiled: Experiencing Multiple Layers of Oppression

The experiences of racialized immigrant and racialized international students at UM illustrate how intersectionality was pivotal in shaping their academic and social realities. Intersectionality, a term coined by Crenshaw (1995), emphasizes the interconnectedness of social categorizations such as race, gender, class, and sexuality, which compound to create unique experiences of both privilege and discrimination. For these students, the intersection of their racial identity with other facets such as gender, sexual orientation, language, and cultural background exacerbated their exclusion and marginalization in both academic and social spaces.

A compelling example of intersectionality arose from Pari, who articulated how her experiences were compounded by her race, sexual orientation, and cultural background. She

highlighted that while she found acceptance in 2SLGBTQIA+ spaces, these were predominantly white and failed to accommodate her racial identity. As she explained, “I find more acceptance in LGBTQ+ spaces which are ironically predominantly white. But in terms of acceptance within my own community, my sexual identity becomes a challenge.” This dual marginalization underscores the importance of understanding how her identities intersect, making it difficult for her to feel fully accepted in any one space.

Similarly, Hossain provided insights into how his racial and immigrant status intersected to create barriers in his academic journey. He noted that the predominantly white academic environment often disregarded his intellectual contributions, perpetuating a sense of epistemic oppression. Hossain remarked, “The white Canadian students often dominated class discussions, leaving little room for me to bring my own perspectives.” His experience reveals how intersectional identities can lead to feelings of exclusion, particularly when academic settings are shaped by Western-centric norms that marginalize those from non-Western backgrounds.

The findings of this study illuminate the nuanced and intersecting ways in which racialized immigrant and racialized international students negotiated their place within academic environments. While these students might have been formally included in university classrooms, their accounts point to a more complex dynamic—one in which presence does not always translate into participation, recognition, or epistemic legitimacy. To make sense of these complexities, I draw on the distinction between *Belonging* and *belonging*—a conceptual lens that has emerged through my engagement with the data rather than being a predefined theoretical import. Though not formally theorized in the existing literature, this distinction is inspired by scholarship on the politics of belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2006) and is aligned with its concern for how institutional boundaries of inclusion are constructed, regulated, and policed. This conceptual

framing allows for a deeper interrogation of how inclusion is both experienced and structured. I define *Belonging* (with an uppercase B) as the condition in which students are not only present but are substantively recognized, their identities affirmed, and their knowledge systems valued within the academic space. *belonging* (with a lowercase b), in contrast, refers to more superficial forms of inclusion—such as formal admission, rhetorical gestures toward diversity, or symbolic participation—without the institutional transformation necessary to support genuine integration.

Pari's narrative offered a compelling illustration of this distinction. As a queer international student from India, she reported a partial sense of acceptance in 2SLGBTQIA+ spaces that were predominantly white and inattentive to racial differences. While she "belonged" in these communities by virtue of her sexual identity, her racial identity remained unacknowledged, rendering her inclusion conditional and fragmented. The intersection of her racial, sexual, and cultural identities compounded her marginalization, as she navigated spaces that affirmed one aspect of her identity while silencing another. The space allowed her to be present but not fully known. This is *belonging* without *Belonging*—an inclusion that does not interrogate its own exclusions. Her experience reflects a layered negotiation of safety and visibility, where access to space does not equate to holistic affirmation. Similarly, Hossain, a racialized international student, articulated how his presence in academic discussions was repeatedly diminished by white peers who dominated classroom discourse. Despite being enrolled and invited to participate, his contributions were sidelined, reflecting a deeper form of epistemic exclusion. His marginalization cannot be disentangled from the intersection of his racial and migratory status, which together positioned him as intellectually peripheral in a predominantly Western academic setting. This is not simply a matter of interpersonal dynamics; it speaks to how normative pedagogical and discursive structures within the classroom reproduce

dominant epistemologies while relegating others to the margins. Hossain was permitted to be in the space, but the space was not reconstituted to accommodate his intellectual presence. Again, this points to *belonging*—access without transformation—and the absence of *Belonging* in its fullest sense.

The concept of *Belonging* vs *belonging*, as drawn from the study's findings, offers a critical distinction that resists simplistic binaries of inclusion and exclusion. It foregrounds the question of how institutional practices produce certain forms of presence as legitimate while rendering others conditional or invisible. More importantly, it allows for a power-conscious reading of inclusion—one that examines not just who is present, but on what terms, and with what consequences. What emerges from this analysis is not a critique of higher education in Canada writ large but a critical engagement with what the participants perceived and observed within the context of this study. The findings suggest that while institutional narratives often foreground diversity and inclusion, the lived experiences of racialized immigrant and international students reveal ongoing tensions between presence and recognition, between being seen and being known. These tensions are not adequately captured by policy frameworks that measure inclusion solely in terms of access or demographic representation.

By articulating the distinction between *Belonging* and *belonging*, this study contributes to an emerging body of literature that seeks to theorize inclusion not as a static condition but as a contested and contingent process. It underscores the importance of examining how inclusion is produced, mediated, and constrained by intersecting structures of race, sexuality, migration, and epistemic power. In doing so, it moves the conversation beyond access and toward a more robust interrogation of the institutional arrangements that shape who can speak, who is heard, and whose presence is ultimately affirmed.

While discussing the complex dynamics of intersectionality through the lens of *Belonging* vs *belonging*, this study not only revealed the layered nature of oppression but also pointed to an additional dimension of intersectionality that warrants further attention. Specifically, the intersection of race and language emerged as a significant axis of analysis, particularly evident in the experiences of Albert, an international Ph.D. student from Ghana. He found that language barriers often compounded his exclusion from academic discourse. He described instances where his accent made it difficult to participate fully, with classmates repeatedly asking him to clarify or repeat himself. Albert observed, "When you have an accent, you often have to repeat yourself, and it makes you feel like your voice is less valued." His account demonstrates how linguistic barriers, intertwined with racial identity, further isolate racialized students.

The findings of this study illuminate the intricate dynamics at the intersection of race and language, highlighting how these factors collectively shape nuanced and often insidious forms of racialization and racism. The experiences reported, such as the ridiculing of minority students for their accents and their perceived lack of spontaneity in English, point to deeper, systemic issues of linguistic marginalization. This resonates with Kubota's (2023) analysis, which argued that racialized graduate students in Canadian universities are not merely subject to overt linguistic racism but also more covert microaggressions in the form of "compliments or inquisitive comments" (p. 758) on their language proficiency. These interactions, seemingly innocuous, function to reify the "raciolinguistic otherness" (p. 758) of non-native speakers, reinforcing their status as outsiders in both academic and social contexts. Critically, this form of othering is not only a matter of linguistic difference but a reflection of how racial hierarchies are maintained through language. The implication that accents signal incompetence speaks to the broader

racialized assumptions about who qualifies as a legitimate speaker of English, underscoring how racialized individuals are positioned as perpetual foreigners. This positioning is not merely incidental but a structural component of linguistic and racial oppression, where non-native speakers are devalued and their linguistic identities pathologized.

Theory of Student Integration and Engagement: A Deconstruction

Tinto's (1993) theory of student integration posits that academic and social integration are critical to student success, but the findings of this study complicate that assumption, especially for racialized immigrant and racialized international students. Tinto's (1993) model underscores the importance of students' integrating into both the academic and social spheres of an institution, a process significantly shaped by how their membership, or participation, within the host community is perceived and valued. In this study, participants reported negative experiences regarding their sense of membership, as their integration processes were significantly hindered by structural racism and cultural exclusion.

Cultural Exclusion and Its Impact on Integration. Participants in this study often felt that they were directed to assimilate into a Western-centric academic culture that did not recognize or value their diverse backgrounds. This is particularly problematic for racialized students who, unlike their white peers, cannot simply blend into the dominant culture. Pari described how often she felt exclusion by Western heteronorms—her instructor used Narnia as a reference, assuming every student was familiar with it—provoking her to assimilate into the dominant culture, even though these behaviors conflicted with her cultural upbringing. This experience highlights the limitations of Tinto's model, which implicitly assumes that all students have equal access to the cultural capital required for integration (Tinto, 2012); this model has

been criticized for not adequately accounting for the varying levels of cultural capital among students from diverse backgrounds (Museus et al., 2016).

Although the pragmatic requirements of some disciplines, which might necessitate a strong emphasis on Canadian-culture-related content, must be acknowledged, additional cultural exclusion also emerged in participants' narratives about curriculum design. Many felt that their academic courses reflected Eurocentric knowledge and perspectives, with little room for alternative worldviews that might reflect themselves. Albert noted that, when given assignments, he usually intended to incorporate examples from his country of origin, which not only would aid in his own understanding but also would add a meaningful contribution to class discussions, as it would allow him to bring an aspect of his identity into the debate. However, his curriculum rarely comprised learning systems that adequately reflected his cultural and country contexts as he would have wished, instead focusing predominantly on the Western context. This erasure of non-Western knowledge is a form of epistemic violence (Anderson, 2021), where the knowledge systems of marginalized groups are systematically excluded from the dominant academic discourse. The effects of this erasure extend beyond the classroom, potentially leading to intellectual marginalization, a diminished sense of belonging, and a lack of critical engagement with diverse perspectives. It reinforces structural inequities by maintaining Western epistemological dominance while limiting students' ability to see themselves as legitimate knowledge producers within academia.

Reason (2009) contended that the way a curriculum connects with and incorporates students' perspectives while meeting their learning needs motivates students to engage with the material, fostering their continued learning and development. Tinto's theory of integration (2017) challenges cultural exclusion within curricula that deescalates students' academic transition to

foreign pedagogical settings. The theory underscores the importance of inclusive pedagogy for fostering diversity, highlighting that true integration occurs through practical classroom measures—such as reflecting diversity in syllabi and course content—that actively support and represent varied cultural perspectives. The analysis in this study underscores the critical issue of cultural exclusion in curriculum design, prompting important questions about how to balance disciplinary pragmatism with the need for inclusivity. For instance, the emphasis on Canadian-culture-related content, while pragmatic, raises questions about the balance between addressing local societal needs and fostering global inclusivity. How can curricula integrate diverse cultural perspectives without diluting the focus on discipline-specific requirements or national priorities? Moreover, while Albert's use of examples from his country of origin added value to discussions, it is worth questioning whether such contributions are structurally encouraged or remain contingent on individual initiative. This dynamic risks positioning cultural inclusion as incidental rather than integral to the curriculum.

The Limits of Integration: Belonging vs. Assimilation. Another critical finding that adds layers of complexity to Tinto's theory is the tension between belonging and assimilation. In this study, for racialized immigrant and racialized international students, integration often meant conforming to white Western norms, which came at the cost of their cultural identities. Participants described how they felt coerced to suppress aspects of their identity—whether it be their accent, sociocultural beliefs, or practices—in order to fit into academic spaces. This form of intangible forced assimilation undermined the goal of integration by making students feel that they must choose between succeeding academically and maintaining their cultural authenticity. Such a situation aligns with the literature that has suggested that, although integration may appear benign, the actual process often entails what Tierney (1999) described as "cultural

suicide" (p. 82). Such integration led to significant distress and hardship for international students in this study.

Strayhorn's (2019a) theory of belonging offers a more nuanced understanding of the integration process, suggesting that students need to feel accepted and valued for who they are, not just for how well they conform to the dominant culture. This theoretical affirmation relates to the perception of one of my study participants, Zara, who described belonging as an experience rooted in being valued for one's inherent qualities rather than for any perceived deficiencies. She conveyed that belonging emerges when individuals can connect with others in a meaningful way, sharing what they are part of and why it holds significance for them. Zara emphasized that it was this mutual understanding and sense-making that lay the foundation for acceptance, which followed naturally when others came to know these aspects of her identity. The findings of this study support Strayhorn's argument that a genuine sense of belonging requires institutions to create spaces where students' diverse identities are embraced rather than erased. In this vein, Tinto's theory emphasizes the evaluation of how institutions define integration, moving beyond mere assimilation to inclusive environments where all students, regardless of their background, can thrive.

Validation Theory: The Importance of Affirming Marginalized Students

Rendón's (1994) validation theory is critical for understanding how validation from faculty and peers plays a central role in fostering racialized students' sense of belonging and academic success. The findings of this study highlight the profound impact that validation—or the lack thereof—can have on minority students. Participants reported feeling invalidated by their instructors and classmates, particularly when their contributions were minimized or dismissed.

Faculty and Peer Validation: A Pathway to Academic Self-Efficacy. Several participants described instances where validation from faculty members helped them overcome feelings of marginalization and develop a stronger sense of academic self-efficacy. One participant, Aarvi, with a South Asian background, recounted how her professor took the time to acknowledge her unique cultural perspective, which made her feel validated and empowered her to contribute more actively in class and lab work. This form of academic validation aligns with Rendón's (1994) argument that affirmation from faculty is essential for fostering students' academic confidence, particularly for those from marginalized backgrounds. Contrary to this, for instance, Rahi, an international student of Latino heritage, shared that her peers' apparent reluctance to recognize her unique cultural background and her capacity to contribute insights led her to feel invisible during classroom discussions. Despite bringing unique perspectives from her lived experiences, her contributions were often sidelined in favor of more dominant viewpoints and perspectives on learning content. This sense of academic invisibility is a recurring theme in the literature on marginalized students' experiences in HE (Museus & Neville, 2012), where racialized students are often made to feel as though their knowledge and perspectives are less valuable than those of their white peers. Validation theory suggests that when students are not validated in their academic environments, they are less likely to engage meaningfully with the material and more likely to disengage from academic life altogether.

Validation theory emphasizes that validation must be proactive, meaning that faculty should not wait for students to seek validation but should actively work to affirm their contributions and identities. In this study, participants who received proactive validation from their instructors felt more empowered to engage in academic discussions and participate fully in their learning environments. This proactive validation was crucial for students who had

previously felt silenced or marginalized in classroom settings. It was especially significant for students from cultural backgrounds where assertive self-promotion is not the norm, as it allowed them to feel recognized and valued without having to adopt behaviors that conflicted with their cultural values.

Lack of Validation and Its Consequences. Conversely, the absence of validation had profound negative effects on students' sense of belonging and academic engagement. Participants who felt that their contributions were routinely dismissed by peers or ignored by instructors were more likely to withdraw from class participation, which echoes Rendón's (1994) theory that students who do not experience validation are at greater risk of disengagement. This situation presents potential adverse outcomes that may be viewed as a challenge to UM's efforts to advance EDI since the university emphasizes engagement as an essential focus area of its EDI strategies to foster an inclusive learning environment (University of Manitoba, 2020). John, a racialized international student, described how his group work experiences often made him feel undervalued. He shared, "You engage in the group activities with domestic students, and they want to be in charge... I need to follow their instructions, although I can offer some suggestions." John's account reflects a broader trend among participants, who felt their voices were unwelcome in academic settings. This dynamic led many to withdraw from classroom interactions, further eroding their academic self-efficacy.

Ecological Systems Theory: Navigating Multiple Layers of Influence

Bronfenbrenner and Morris's ecological systems theory (2006) provides a valuable framework for understanding how students' experiences of exclusion and belonging are shaped by various overlapping systems, from the microsystem of classroom interactions to the macrosystem of broader societal norms. This study's findings suggest that racialized immigrant

and racialized international students navigate complex environments that are perceived to be hostile at multiple levels, all of which contribute to their sense of belonging—or lack thereof—in HE.

Microsystem: Classroom Dynamics and Peer Interactions. At the microsystem level, participants described how their immediate interactions with peers and instructors played a significant role in shaping their academic experiences. The classroom environment, in particular, was a critical space where students either felt validated or marginalized. Several participants shared stories of how racialized dynamics within the classroom made them feel excluded or alienated. One international student, Rahi, for example, explained how her accent and cultural background often became sources of ridicule among her peers, making it difficult for her to participate in class discussions. This reflects Bronfenbrenner's theory that the microsystem—the settings in which individuals have direct, personal interactions—can profoundly impact their overall sense of well-being.

Furthermore, in this study, the power dynamics within these microsystems often reflected broader societal inequalities. As described by several participants, white students and faculty frequently dominated academic discussions, leaving little room for the voices of racialized students. This dynamic is consistent with CRT's principle of social justice—its CRT to abolish the oppression of racial subordination, discrimination, access, and disparities, where white individuals retain control over academic spaces and exclude those who do not conform to their cultural norms. This dynamic can also be understood through the lens of racial resentment, where resistance to the inclusion of diverse voices stems from an underlying perception that efforts to address racial inequities threaten the status or privileges of dominant groups. Such resentment reinforces existing power imbalances, making it even more challenging for racialized students to

assert their perspectives and participate fully in academic spaces. Hossain conveyed his perception that the classroom environment was unwelcoming, hindering self-expression and meaningful contribution. He noted that racialized students, particularly students of colour, faced limitations due to the dominance of white students, which effectively created an invisible barrier or "glass ceiling" that led to obstructed opportunities for racialized students to contribute fully. This experience of classroom power imbalance reflects how white privilege operates in group settings, limiting the perspectives of racialized students. Given this situation at the microsystem level of the ecological system, non-conventional (immigrant and international) minority students were found to establish relationships with individuals from similar backgrounds as a navigational strategy, which could be very significant for fostering a sense of campus belonging. This raises a concern about why minority students often require peers and faculty members of similar backgrounds, rather than one from different backgrounds, to build connections that develop their sense of belonging and allow them to feel safe (intellectually and emotionally).

Mesosystem: Cultural Tension in the Classroom. The mesosystem, as defined by Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006), encompasses the interactions and connections between elements of a microsystem. For international and immigrant students, the mesosystem represents the intersection of their cultural identities and the pedagogical expectations of assimilation within foreign pedagogical settings. This duality often creates tension as students navigate between their cultural norms and the host culture's educational practices.

Participants highlighted how these cultural tensions manifested in the classroom. For instance, Pari, a racialized international participant, explained that, in Canadian culture, making eye contact during conversation is customary and often interpreted as a sign of engagement. However, she noted that, in some Asian communities, avoiding direct eye contact, particularly

with elders or those in authority, is a sign of respect. Professors and instructors unfamiliar with such cultural nuances may misinterpret limited eye contact as indifference or disengagement, perpetuating stereotypes or misunderstandings. Pari urged the importance of recognizing these cultural variations, emphasizing that customs shape identity and should not be dismissed or misread in educational interactions. This aligns with Leung (2021), who argued that cultural differences in nonverbal communication can lead to implicit biases in cross-cultural settings, reinforcing dominant norms while positioning culturally diverse students as outsiders. Similarly, Vaccaro and Newman (2016) highlighted that micro-level interactions, such as misinterpreted behaviors, can significantly impact students' sense of belonging and academic self-efficacy, particularly when institutional actors acknowledge diverse cultural communication styles in only a limited way.

While the analysis by Leung (2021) and Vaccaro and Newman (2016) effectively highlights the cultural tensions faced by international and immigrant students, it risks oversimplifying the dynamics of the mesosystem by framing cultural differences primarily as misinterpretations by the host culture. This perspective, while valid, could inadvertently overlook the agency of immigrant students in navigating and reshaping these interactions. For instance, how do international and immigrant students actively negotiate their cultural practices within these environments, and to what extent do they resist, adapt, or transform the dominant norms? Additionally, the analysis assumes that host culture practices, such as making eye contact, are monolithic. Are there variations within the host culture itself that complicate these interactions, and how do these internal inconsistencies affect international and immigrant students' experiences?

Exosystem: Institutional Policies and EDI Initiatives. At the exosystem level, institutional policies—particularly those that operationalize EDI through financial investment and disbursement—significantly impacted participants' experiences of exclusion and belonging. Participants frequently expressed frustration with the lack of proactive policies aimed at addressing the financial needs of racialized students. While the university in this study promoted diversity and inclusion in its communications, many students felt these efforts did little to address structural barriers, particularly when they encountered limitations on access to financial support or scholarships due to conditions perceived as unfair, such as those related to immigration status.

For instance, Behzad, an international Ph.D. student in Physiology, noted that his financial considerations had not been adequately addressed and highlighted the importance of having scholarships specifically designated for international students. He pointed out that many of the university's scholarships were allocated primarily to Canadian students, leaving limited options for international students. He further explained that he was ineligible for major research funding opportunities, such as CIHR and SSHRC, unless he attained permanent residency. This lack of eligibility, he expressed, created a sense of separation and served as a barrier to accessing opportunities.

The findings highlight a significant gap in financial support and inclusivity for international students, aligning with the literature that critiques current EDI initiatives. According to Beattie (2021), while universities actively recruit international students, this recruitment is often financially motivated, with institutions prioritizing revenue generation over equitable access to resources. The restricted eligibility for major scholarships, as noted in Behzad's experience, underscores how international students may face systemic barriers that

marginalize them within the academic community. Mugo and Puplampu (2022) advocated for an approach that recognizes international students as equal contributors to the academy, emphasizing that such equity could foster a more culturally aware academic environment. Consequently, the findings highlight the importance of a careful review of financial and structural considerations within EDI policies, with particular attention to addressing the financial constraints faced by many international minority students who would significantly benefit from such support to thrive.

The analysis of institutional policies and EDI initiatives, as detailed in the exosystem framework, merits further nuance when considering university-led financial support mechanisms such as bursaries, emergency funds, and other forms of targeted assistance. While the findings emphasize significant systemic barriers—such as limited access to scholarships for international students—the discussion can be enriched by acknowledging the complexities of institutional responses. Universities frequently deploy initiatives like emergency funds or short-term bursaries to address immediate financial crises faced by students, including those from underrepresented or international backgrounds. However, while valuable, these measures may inadvertently reinforce a reactive rather than proactive approach to financial inclusivity. Such piecemeal solutions often fail to address systemic inequities, leaving critical gaps in long-term financial support, as seen in Behzad's inability to access major research funding. Moreover, eligibility criteria for these forms of aid can mirror the exclusions present in larger scholarship frameworks, perpetuating inequities linked to immigration status or enrollment classification. Thus, while these initiatives demonstrate institutional recognition of financial hardship, their scope and implementation may insufficiently align with broader equity goals, raising important questions about the depth and sustainability of current EDI practices.

The macrosystem—the fourth dimension of the ecological system—is not addressed in this study, as its scope does not extend to exploring students' experiences and perceptions of sense of belonging, safe spaces, and inclusive pedagogy within the broader societal context beyond the university setting.

Interpretation of Findings in Light of Literature

Synthesizing Findings with Existing Research

This study's findings align with a considerable body of research on race and exclusion in HE, particularly in how racialized immigrant and racialized international students experience marginalization despite efforts to promote diversity. As highlighted in previous studies, students from underrepresented backgrounds, particularly those from racialized groups, often experience academic environments that are outwardly inclusive but, in practice, are filled with subtle forms of exclusion and discrimination (Harper & Quaye, 2015). Participants in this study perceived how their contributions were left out or dismissed, even in spaces that were theoretically meant to encourage diversity and inclusion. This finding aligns with existing literature on the challenges marginalized students face within institutional settings as pointed out by scholars such as Grindstaff (2022), who discussed how implicit biases can marginalize certain voices, despite formal commitments to inclusivity. Even well-intentioned diversity initiatives may inadvertently perpetuate these inequalities if they focus solely on compositional diversity (e.g., increasing numbers of minority students) without addressing the institutional structures that marginalize these groups, such as biased evaluative criteria. Grindstaff's analysis highlighted that the effectiveness of diversity initiatives depends not only on promoting representation but also on addressing the embedded biases that limit the full recognition and integration of marginalized perspectives. Hill (2009) further examined how diversity initiatives supporting sexual minorities

can encounter resistance, including “blowback” and “backlash,” from individuals or groups who perceive these efforts as threats to existing cultural norms and power dynamics. Such resistance can manifest as subtle undermining or overt opposition, complicating the successful implementation of diversity programs.

One of the most consistent themes in this study is the exclusion of racialized students from meaningful participation in the classroom and social spaces. This exclusion was often enacted through microaggressions, silencing, and curriculum content that reflected the experiences and knowledge systems of students from diverse cultural backgrounds less than those of mainstream students. For instance, one international participant described the importance of including content relevant to racialized non-mainstream students in relation to Canadian content and perspectives, as this would significantly impact and escalate their understanding of the Canadian context and make them feel more included. Although there is tension around the contested issue of curriculum content choice, focusing on the Canadian context is required in certain disciplines for pragmatic and objective reasons. However, this exclusion mirrors the findings of Kohli and Solórzano (2012), who documented how curriculum erasure contributes to the marginalization of students of colour in predominantly white institutions.

The sense of isolation and the tension of “fitting in” described by participants is also consistent with research on belonging uncertainty (Walton & Cohen, 2007). In this study, many racialized students, particularly those from immigrant backgrounds, expressed feelings of alienation and uncertainty about their place in academic spaces. These students frequently questioned whether they belonged at their institution (particularly when they were discriminated against or stereotyped due to intersectionality of race, gender, sexuality, or culture), whether their

cultural perspectives were being devalued or ignored, and whether their epistemic safety was being compromised by a downplaying of their agency and intelligence. This finding both speaks to the state of belongingness or exclusion of these students and also supports Walton and Brady's (2017) argument that marginalized students experience constant questioning of their position of belonging in academic environments, a sentiment reinforced by the microaggressions they face in classrooms and interactions with peers and faculty.

Sense of Belonging and Its Impact on Academic Engagement

The importance of belonging cannot be overstated in this study. The literature consistently has pointed to the idea that a sense of belonging—defined by Strayhorn (2019a) as the feeling of being accepted, valued, and respected within a community—is critical for student success. For the participants in this study, belonging was deeply tied to their ability to see themselves reflected in the classroom and to feel that their contributions were taken seriously. This perspective on belonging is similar to those found in the literature (Healey & Stroman, 2021), suggesting that belonging is contingent upon students' sense that their presence and academic contributions are acknowledged.

Participants frequently discussed the intersections of race, gender, and immigration status in shaping their sense of belonging. For example, Pari noted that queer white women were more represented in her program than women from the subcontinent, making her feel that her identity was invisible in the academic landscape within her program. This reflects the broader literature on intersectionality, which has emphasized that marginalized students experience belonging differently based on the multiple facets of their identity (e.g., race, gender, sexuality). For example, Vaccaro and Newman (2016) reported that students' sense of belonging is influenced

by multiple identity factors, such as race, gender, and sexuality, and that these identities interact in complex ways to shape their educational experiences

As described by the participants, the classroom environment plays a critical role in fostering or hindering a sense of belonging. Albert and Zara both highlighted the importance of being seen and valued for their unique contributions, with Zara stated that belonging happens when one is valued "for what I have" rather than what one lacks. However, John's experience of being disregarded in group assignments because of racial stereotypes highlights how easily this sense of belonging can be undermined. These findings not only support Museus et al. (2018), who not only argued for the importance of campus climate in fostering a sense of belonging among marginalized students but also addressed a gap in the literature by examining the sense of belonging specifically within the classroom environment—a context that Museus et al. recommended for further exploration.

Referring to the context manifested by Albert and Zara, Mizzi et al. (2021) introduced the concept of "belongingscapes," which emphasizes the fluidity of belonging, noting that it is not a fixed destination but rather imbued with temporality. Participants may feel a sense of belonging at certain times, but this feeling is subject to change and can be fragile. For example, students may feel they belong in a classroom or group for a period, but they may remain acutely aware that this belonging can be disrupted suddenly, leading to exclusion. The consequence of this fragile belonging is detrimental: It can cause minority students to retreat into silence, confining themselves and gradually diminishing their sense of belonging over time. This aligns with the experiences of participants like John, whose feeling of exclusion based on racial stereotypes during group assignments reflected how easily these students' sense of belonging can shift, turning moments of inclusion into feelings of isolation.

Moreover, the study found that when students experience belonging, they are more likely to be academically engaged and motivated. Participants who felt validated and included in classroom discussions were more willing to participate and take on leadership roles, as demonstrated by Najib's and Albert's reflections on their group work experiences. This aligns with research by Zumbrunn et al. (2014), who found that a sense of belonging positively influences self-efficacy and academic achievement. Ultimately, the notion of "belongingscapes" highlights the precarious nature of belonging for marginalized students, suggesting that fostering a stable and inclusive environment is essential to maintaining their academic engagement. Without consistent validation and recognition of their identities and contributions, a student can be at risk of being marginalized, which not only impacts their personal sense of belonging but also hinders their academic performance and overall university experience.

Safe Space as a Critical Concept in Higher Education

The notion of safe spaces—places where marginalized students can express themselves without fear of ridicule or dismissal—emerged as a critical need among participants in this study. Participants emphasized their desire for classrooms and academic environments where they could discuss sensitive issues, such as racism, xenophobia, colonialism, sexuality, and cultural identity, without experiencing backlash from their peers or instructors. However, many participants felt such spaces were sorely lacking in their academic experiences.

This lack of safe spaces reflects broader critiques in the literature about how educational institutions often face challenges in providing genuine emotional and psychological safety for marginalized students (MacDonald, 2020). Participants described their classrooms as environments where racist stereotypes and cultural insensitivities frequently went unchecked, contributing to a sense of vulnerability and fear of speaking out. This aligns with Harless's

(2018) notion of epistemic safety, which suggests that students from marginalized backgrounds often feel that their knowledge and perspectives are not respected or protected in academic spaces. Rather, this hindrance to agency yields epistemic oppression (Dotson, 2014), or epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007), which often is perpetuated (either intentionally or unconsciously) by socially dominant groups. Hossain, a study participant, reported experiencing epistemic injustice that oppressed his epistemic safety to contribute, despite his intellectual capability, due to the dominance of white students. He recalled feeling uncomfortable and unsafe sharing his views in his first academic class within a Canadian context. Here, Hosain's example of epistemic oppression and the difficulty of creating an epistemically safe space is positioned in what Alison Bailey called the "unlevel knowing field" (Bailey, 2014, p. 62), which "offers members of socially dominant groups an epistemic home turf advantage" (p. 62).

The study revealed that several participants engaged in self-silencing as a coping strategy to prevent potential conflict or ridicule when sharing thoughts, ideas, and beliefs, particularly in environments perceived as lacking safe space. This behavior, I argue, contradicts the fundamental purpose of safe spaces, which is to break down oppressive barriers by encouraging open expression and emphasizing its epistemic aspect that fosters knowledge generation and transmission (Anderson, 2021); instead, self-silencing highlights a tension between the concepts of safe space and freedom of speech. As a result, the notion of a safe space, intended as a refuge for students presenting diverse ideas, can sometimes result in isolation from those with differing perspectives (Grieve, 2016). Although freedom of speech is widely supported in Canadian universities (Thieme, 2024), students may still hesitate to voice their opinions due to concerns that expressing certain viewpoints might provoke resistance, disagreement, or even social

alienation from those who interpret free speech as an entitlement to challenge or dismiss differing perspectives.

This complex interpretation of safe spaces, which frames them as protective zones, aligns with Piquemal et al.'s (2021) observations on the crisis around freedom of speech and its associated calls for censorship. The literature has suggested that freedom of expression can indeed serve as a tool for challenging norms and engaging with contentious issues (Thieme, 2024). Yet, universities might need to consider certain limits on expression to ensure a comfortable and secure learning atmosphere (Golding, 2000), as unrestricted speech can result in negative instances of structural racism, homophobia, xenophobia, and Islamophobia, thereby testing universities' commitments to free expression (Thieme, 2024).

Findings from this study suggest that freedom of expression may be hindered when students with differing values or viewpoints feel unsafe sharing their perspectives or hesitate due to concerns about potential backlash. For example, one participant, Albert, described his challenges with discussions around 2SLGBTQIA+ issues, which conflicted with his Christian beliefs. As a result, he often avoided these discussions, fearing that his perspectives could be negatively perceived by classmates who might feel attacked. Amid the increasing effort to bolster inclusion and equity within HEs, where 2SLGBTQIA+ perspectives are often suppressed or unacknowledged across curricula (Garvey et al., 2018), the example of Albert's reluctance to share his viewpoint underscores the need for a nuanced distinction between safe space and freedom of speech to establish a "brave space" (Arao & Clemens, 2013, p. 136), which would provide students like Albert the choice to engage in or step back from difficult conversations. From a diversity perspective, addressing the limitations on free speech to protect safe spaces involves examining institutional policies informed by Canadian legal frameworks—a gap

highlighted in the literature (Thieme, 2024). These policies are positioned to balance freedom of expression with equity and justice principles, fostering an inclusive environment while acknowledging the broader impacts of unrestricted speech on marginalized communities.

This study analysis illuminates a crucial tension between freedom of expression and efforts to foster inclusion and equity within HE settings, but certain complexities demand further interrogation. Albert's reluctance to engage in discussions around 2SLGBTQIA+ issues due to the perceived conflict with his Christian beliefs foregrounds a need to critically examine how educational spaces navigate divergent perspectives without compromising the safety and inclusion of marginalized groups.

Albert's fear of backlash and perception of vulnerability are significant for understanding the psychological impact of shifting power dynamics in academic spaces—how changes in who holds influence, authority, or legitimacy within academic discussions affect individuals' emotions, behaviors, and sense of belonging. However, these fears need to be contextualized within the broader historical and structural inequities that have long silenced 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals. In this case, contextualization must come from educators, institutional policies, and critical discourse analysis that acknowledge power imbalances—ensuring that calls for free expression do not equate the discomfort of those in dominant positions with the lived experiences of marginalized communities, whose rights and identities have long been contested. This contextualization is necessary not to dismiss Albert's feelings but to interrogate whether his perception of unsafety stemmed from a genuine threat or from a disruption to the social privilege historically afforded to dominant cultural and religious groups. His discomfort in engaging with 2SLGBTQIA+ topics raises a critical question: Did Albert genuinely experience this academic space as unsafe, or did he perceive the erosion of his ability to dictate the terms of discourse as a

loss of privilege? If Albert's homophobic stance led him to frame these discussions as unsafe, it is essential to question whether the discomfort he experienced was the result of being marginalized or simply of being held accountable for engaging with perspectives that challenged his worldview. While he might have experienced unease when confronted with discussions that questioned his deeply held beliefs, this discomfort was not equivalent to the systemic oppression faced by 2SLGBTQIA+ individuals, who have historically been denied voice, legitimacy, and, in many cases, fundamental rights in both educational and broader societal contexts.

The concept of brave spaces, as proposed by Arao and Clemens (2013), offers a framework for fostering respectful and critical engagement; however, its operationalization requires deeper scrutiny. While brave spaces advocate for open dialogue and discomfort as a means of growth, they also risk legitimizing perspectives that challenge the rights and existence of marginalized individuals under the guise of fostering debate. If such spaces are structured to encourage students like Albert to disengage from discussions that challenge their beliefs, they may inadvertently reinforce intellectual avoidance rather than fostering the necessary critical interrogation of deeply held assumptions. Furthermore, the discussion of bravery in these spaces must not only apply to Albert's willingness to engage with difficult topics but also to the resilience required of 2SLGBTQIA+ students who must repeatedly justify their identities, experiences, and right to equitable participation. The burden placed on these students in so-called brave spaces often results in asymmetrical labor, where those most affected by systemic inequities are expected to facilitate the learning of those whose perspectives remain unexamined.

The question, then, is not merely how to create brave spaces, but how to ensure that these spaces foster genuine equity. While Albert may have felt that his voice was constrained in discussions about 2SLGBTQIA+ issues, the experiences of 2SLGBTQIA+ students reveal the

ongoing necessity of educational spaces where they are not required to debate their own legitimacy or educate those who hold exclusionary views. Equity in educational spaces requires that both students like Albert and 2SLGBTQIA+ students have the opportunity to engage, but it also demands that institutional structures critically assess whose discomfort signals a necessary confrontation with privilege rather than a legitimate threat to their participation.

The literature on safe spaces has argued that these environments are crucial for fostering inclusive pedagogy and student engagement (Florian & Beaton, 2018). Without such spaces, marginalized students are less likely to feel comfortable sharing their perspectives, hindering their academic development and the overall diversity of thought within the classroom. The findings from this study suggest that educational institutions need to do more to buttress their commitment to ensuring the most inclusive and safe environments where all students feel their contributions are valued and respected.

Inclusive Pedagogy: From Concept to Practice

Inclusive pedagogy emerged as a key theme in both the study's findings and the academic literature. Florian and Beaton (2018) defined inclusive pedagogy as an approach that moves beyond simply accommodating students with difficulties to providing rich learning opportunities that are accessible to all. This study's participants emphasized the importance of such pedagogy in creating a sense of belonging. For instance, Albert pointed out that effective group work, where tasks were divided equitably, made him feel that his contributions were valued. This underscores the potential of inclusive pedagogy to foster a sense of belonging among students from diverse backgrounds.

In the literature, inclusive pedagogy has been tied to student validation, a concept central to Rendón's (1994) validation theory. Validation occurs when students feel that their

contributions are recognized and respected by both peers and faculty. Several participants in this study described feeling validated when their experiences and identities were acknowledged in classroom discussions. John, for example, mentioned that reflective activities in class allowed him to connect academic content to his individual perspectives and professional experiences, fostering a sense of safety and validation. This aligns with Hockings and his associates' (2012) argument that inclusive pedagogy must consider students' diverse backgrounds and encourage them to bring their perspectives into the learning environment. However, the findings suggest that inclusive pedagogy was perceived as lacking in practice on several occasions. Participants reported experiences of exclusion, particularly in classrooms where Western and Canadian perspectives dominated the curriculum. For example, Najib, a Muslim immigrant student, expressed how discussions on the worldviews of others were overshadowed by Western ideologies, leaving non-Western perspectives relatively absent, including Muslim viewpoints, which were often labeled as racist. This not only made him feel invisible but also underscored the necessity for sincere attention to broadly recognizing and maintaining diverse worldviews within the educational landscape, especially in pedagogy.

Similarly, other participants, such as Rahi and John, voiced concerns about how the overemphasis on the Canadian K–12 system hindered their engagement. John, an international student unfamiliar with Canadian K–12 education, often felt lost during class discussions centered around this system. His struggle to connect with the material made it difficult to actively participate in classroom conversations, reinforcing his sense of exclusion. Rahi further elaborated on the monopolization of class discussions by white students, particularly in online settings, where topics primarily revolved around Canadian education. She expected more openness to diverse perspectives but instead perceived that these discussions remained confined

to the comfort zone of her Canadian peers, limiting her ability to contribute meaningfully. This finding can be theorized through a critique of liberalism (Ladson-Billings, 2013), which challenges the assertions of the educational system and its institutions regarding objectivity and equal opportunity. From a critical stance drawing on CRT, it could be claimed that "objectivity" and "equal opportunity" are not neutral concepts but are often shaped by dominant cultural norms that reflect and reinforce the experiences and values of socially privileged groups. For example, "objectivity" in curriculum design may implicitly devalue the histories and knowledge systems of marginalized communities, to the detriment of fairness and equity—which are fundamental to the concept of inclusive pedagogy (Livingston-Galloway & Robinson-Neal, 2021). In this study, this lack of inclusion not only restricted epistemic diversity but also harmed these participants' emotional and intellectual safety. Additionally, the exclusive focus on Canadian content was a recurring theme. Albert and Aarvi both pointed out that their courses overwhelmingly concentrated on Canadian examples. While this was beneficial for understanding the local context, it left little room for exploring global perspectives or issues relevant to students from other parts of the world. Aarvi suggested that incorporating more diverse, international examples would create a richer, more inclusive learning environment. This aligns with the broader literature by scholars such as Florian and Beaton (2018), who called for pedagogical approaches that actively incorporate diverse cultural perspectives into course materials and classroom discussions. Even when institutional EDI mandates are complied with and/or the practice of academic freedom leads to faculty-developed curriculum, it may be challenging to provide equal learning opportunities for all students when the dominant culture remains overrepresented in the curriculum. The excessive focus on Canadian content reflected in these findings created barriers to inclusive pedagogy by marginalizing non-mainstream students

and silencing their contributions. From a progressive, movement-of-inclusion perspective, these barriers contradict the purpose of inclusive pedagogy, which is regarded as a process of removing exclusion so that all students have equal access to learning opportunities in mainstream classrooms (Livingston-Galloway & Robinson-Neal, 2021).

The findings highlight concerns regarding the challenges of inclusive pedagogy, particularly the dominance of Western and Canadian perspectives in curricula, but these issues require a nuanced examination. Najib's experience of feeling invisible due to the marginalization of non-Western, including Muslim, worldviews demonstrates the risk of exclusion inherent in narrowly focused discussions. Similarly, the examples of Rahi and John, who both struggled with an overemphasis on the Canadian K–12 system, illuminate the challenges faced by international students in engaging with materials and discussions tailored to local educational contexts. For John, unfamiliarity with the Canadian K–12 framework created barriers to participation, while Rahi noted how discussions in online spaces were dominated by local students, leaving limited room for alternative perspectives.

At the same time, the extent to which this focus constitutes an overemphasis remains contested from the perspective of John and Rahi. However, many students of the faculty of education at UM who are educators in Manitoba schools view this local emphasis as critical to equipping them with practical tools to address the needs of their students. However, Albert and Aarvi's experiences highlighted how the predominant use of Canadian examples often precludes the inclusion of global perspectives, creating a gap in addressing the diverse backgrounds and aspirations of the student body. Aarvi, in particular, noted that incorporating international case studies would enhance the richness and inclusivity of the learning environment. This tension points to a critical question: How can disciplines strike a balance between the pragmatic

requirements of local relevance and the broader goal of fostering an inclusive, globally aware educational landscape? Addressing this balance is crucial to advancing inclusive pedagogy that respects both the practical needs of local educators and the diverse realities of a global student body.

Key Principles of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) Emerging from the Study

This section presents key principles of EDI that emerged from crucial insights based on the study's findings. These principles were drawn from the perceptions and experiences of racialized immigrant and racialized international students and reflect the significant challenges they face in terms of belonging, safety, and inclusivity in HE pedagogy. Each principle is based on the study's analysis and can serve to guide adjustments to institutional policy and pedagogical practices (if the university authorities feel inclined to make such adjustments) to advance EDI efforts at UM and beyond.

The Emotional Cost of Being "Other"

One of the most prominent themes to emerge from the study was the emotional cost associated with being perceived as "the other" in academic spaces. For many racialized immigrant and racialized international students, their presence in the university was perceived to have been marked by feelings of alienation, exclusion, and invisibility, which exacted an emotional toll to some extent. The concept of "the other," which refers to the psychological burden placed on students who are continuously reminded of their marginalized status, aligns with the broader literature on stereotype threat and belonging uncertainty (Walton & Brady, 2017).

In this study, participants narrated several instances where they felt othered due to their race, accent, or cultural background. For example, John described how his classmates frequently

questioned his ability to succeed in group projects, based on perceived assumptions tied to his non-mainstream and immigrant status. This constant questioning of participants' competence and belonging created a chronic sense of anxiety that affected their academic performance and overall well-being (Elkord, 2017; Neufeld et al., 2016).

The emotional toll of feeling othered also led to a sense of cultural dissonance, with students feeling that their cultural heritage was either overlooked or undervalued in the classroom. This was evident in the experiences of Pari, a queer student (who commented on a lack of eye contact that went against Canadian norms), and Loren, a female immigrant student (whose assertiveness was often misinterpreted). As Crenshaw's (1995) theory of intersectionality highlights, individuals who exist at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities (e.g., race, gender, sexuality) experience compounded forms of exclusion. For many participants, this led to feelings of exhaustion as they struggled to navigate an academic environment that appeared to be designed to accommodate only a narrow definition of success—one that counted them as less. This finding underscores the importance of creating academic spaces where epistemic safety (Harless, 2018) is prioritized and where students are not positioned in such a way that they must justify their presence or capabilities. Without addressing the emotional cost of being othered, universities will likely alienate and disadvantage racialized students, limiting their potential for academic success and personal development.

Mattering: The Importance of Feeling Valued

The concept of mattering, or the sense that one is important and valued within a community (Tovar, 2013), emerged as a critical principle in the study. Several participants felt they did not matter to the institution, either because their voices were unheard or their contributions were unrecognized, which implies that the notion of mattering was not an

institutional priority; if it were, it could foster an inclusive and supportive campus environment, particularly for students from marginalized backgrounds (Juvonen et al., 2019; Rattan et al., 2012). This lack of mattering appeared particularly for students who identified as marginalized on the basis of race and sexuality, as they often felt invisible in discussions around diversity and inclusion, as perceived by Albert, Pari, John, and Hossain.

Mattering is closely tied to sense of belonging, as students who feel that they matter are more likely to engage with the academic community and persist in their studies (Strayhorn, 2019b). In this study, participants who felt that their experiences and identities were validated by faculty and peers were more likely to report a strong sense of belonging and academic motivation. Conversely, those who felt ignored or devalued were more likely to disengage from the academic community and experience feelings of isolation, as Aarvi, John, Hossain, and Rahi commented. This finding highlights the importance of advancing an inclusive campus climate where all students feel they matter. Institutions can foster mattering by ensuring that students' contributions are recognized and valued, both in and out of the classroom. This involves not only acknowledging students' academic achievements but also expanding and offering informed opportunities for meaningful participation in decision-making processes and student leadership roles. By doing so, universities can create a more inclusive and supportive environment that encourages students to thrive.

Diversity Requires Membership, Not Mere Integration

The findings also revealed that diversity in HE needs to be conceptualized in ways that extend beyond integration; it requires a sense of membership and belonging (Nasir & Vakil, 2017). While many institutions, including UM, have made strides in integrating racialized students into their programs, participants in this study desired a deeper level of inclusion—one

that transcended physical presence and fostered meaningful participation. Diversity requires membership; this key principle stipulates that full membership within a broader and well-resourced learning community is linked to an appreciation and valuing of commonalities across all students, as highlighted within educational settings. Such membership has been associated with increased opportunities, particularly for minoritized youth, by facilitating access to resources, networks, and support that may otherwise remain unavailable outside these communities (Nasir & Vakil, 2017).

Several participants, including Hossain, Behzad, Albert, and John, described feeling as though they were tokenized within the university, where their presence was used to showcase the institution's diversity, but they were not truly included in the decision-making processes or social networks that shape the academic experience. According to Walton and Brady (2017), fostering a true sense of membership—where students feel that they are an essential part of the academic community—requires deliberate efforts to recognize and validate the diverse experiences of all students. True diversity, according to the participants' perceptions, requires creating spaces where racialized students feel like members of the academic community, not just passive participants. For instance, Najib highlighted the difference between environments that merely included him and those where he felt like a valued member within the learning community. In the latter, his experiences as a Palestinian immigrant were seen as valuable contributions to the classroom discussion, rather than as marginal or irrelevant: "In some classes, I felt like they truly valued my perspective. I wasn't just another student—they wanted to hear about my experiences and how they related to the topic at hand."

Thus, situating diversity within the construct of "membership" entails nurturing a collective identity—a shared feeling of belonging to a group, where students from varied

backgrounds are urged to collaborate and assist one another. By shifting the focus from integration to membership, universities can create a more equitable and inclusive environment where all students feel they belong and have a stake in the institution's success.

Implications of the Study

This section delves into the implications of the study's findings regarding racialized immigrant and racialized international students' sense of belonging, safety, and inclusive pedagogy at UM. These students' experiences highlight challenges tied to perceived systemic inequities and exclusion that influenced their academic engagement and personal well-being. The study findings highlight the importance of implementing robust institutional policies to buttress EDI efforts, fostering a university environment that is increasingly inclusive and welcoming to all members. The sense of belonging emerges as a central pillar in this discussion, reflecting its importance not only for academic success but also for racialized students' psychological and emotional well-being. A key finding of the study is the need for fostering safe spaces where students can express their identities without fear of marginalization. Safe spaces are critical for racialized students' sense of belonging, providing epistemic and emotional safety that encourages full participation in academic life. Additionally, the study emphasizes the importance of inclusive pedagogy, which not only promotes a sense of belonging but also ensures that students' contributions within safe space are valued and respected in academic settings. This section offers policy recommendations, research implications, and suggestions for improving safe spaces and inclusive pedagogy, all focusing on fostering a genuine sense of belonging for racialized students at UM. By addressing these key areas, UM can take significant steps toward creating a more inclusive and welcoming campus that promotes academic success and well-being for all students.

Policy Implications

Strengthening the Sense of Belonging: Academic Success, Mental Health, and Institutional Culture

A sense of belonging is not just a social or emotional need but a critical factor influencing academic success and mental well-being, particularly for racialized immigrant and racialized international students. International students are especially vulnerable to experiencing loneliness, as they often leave behind their families, social networks, and cultural environments (van Gijn-Grosvenor & Huisman, 2020). The study emphasized that students who feel accepted, valued, and respected within their academic community are more likely to succeed (Strayhorn, 2019a) because their sense of belonging motivates them academically to put more effort into study (Pedler et al., 2022). However, microaggression, cultural differences in pedagogical practices, language barriers, marginalization, and systemic barriers that privilege dominant cultural norms are often perceived to prevent racialized students from achieving this sense of belonging, which in turn hampers their academic engagement.

Academic Success and Mentorship Programs. According to some of the study participants, UM could pay closer attention to structuring policies and programs so that they explicitly strengthen academic support, especially for students who have language barriers, and foster sense of belonging for racialized students. To this end, Albert and Hossain suggested that departments could establish dedicated “Language and Cultural Clubs” within their facilities, encouraging voluntary student participation to foster intercultural and racial connections. This initiative would promote students’ academic success by engaging them in peer learning, enhancing their English language proficiency, and providing them with a platform for sharing thoughts, ideas, and personal stories. Such interactions would help cultivate a sense of affinity

and belonging and reduce the divide between mainstream white students and students from diverse backgrounds.

Another key approach, as Pari, Rahi, and Najib proposed, is expanding mentorship programs that pair racialized students with faculty or peers from dominant and non-dominant groups who can provide guidance and support. These mentorship relationships are vital for students who feel disconnected from the dominant campus culture, as they offer a trusted ally to help navigate both academic and social challenges. Additionally, targeted initiatives such as events celebrating the cultural heritage of racialized communities and dialogues on identity and inclusion would enhance students' connection to the university and their peers. These initiatives need to avoid becoming peripheral celebrations that students such as the participants perceive to be more focused on showcasing diversity on the UM web-portal (e.g., the days and months of significance announced by the office of Equity Transformation-UM) than on actually creating of environments where students can feel meaningfully integrated and an integral part of the entire learning community within the institution. These initiatives could include festival vacations for individuals from diverse racial and cultural groups along with specific and micro-level small efforts to celebrate these events institutionally as an inclusive and beautiful gesture of diversity recognition. For example, the Health Sciences Graduate Students' Association (HSGSA) of UM has recently organized a vibrant multicultural festival, Culturo-Fest 2024, an appreciated step towards this goal.

Mental Health Support and Well-Being. The study also highlighted the psychological toll of exclusion on racialized students, many of whom reported feelings of isolation, anxiety, and burnout. Fostering a sense of belonging is thus essential for supporting mental health and well-being. When students feel disconnected from their academic and social environments, their

mental health deteriorates, which directly affects their academic performance. To address this, UM might need a blanket focus on expanding its mental health services to provide tailored support for racialized students. This can include offering, as John, Zara, and Rahi proposed, access to culturally competent counselors from marginalized groups who understand the complexities of race, identity, and belonging, and facilitating support groups where students can share their experiences in a safe, non-judgmental space. Moreover, the rich resources available at UM for student health and wellness should be better publicized and brought to students' fingertips to make students aware of these resources, motivated to use them, and able to navigate them with ease. This process might include creating multimedia clips involving diverse learning communities to render how students at UM are getting supported, launching mobile apps, initiating induction programs after enrollment rather than solely emailing students about these resources, and closely observing outcomes and planning further actions. These measures would help reduce feelings of isolation and promote a sense of community, improving both mental health and academic outcomes.

Institutional Culture and Leadership Commitment. While specific policies and programs are essential, they must be part of a broader institutional culture that genuinely values diversity and inclusion. When faculty from underrepresented groups disproportionately bear the responsibility for driving changes in institutional culture and frequently take leadership in advocating for EDI initiatives—while white faculty may perceive themselves as passive beneficiaries, leading to less involvement in EDI work—this imbalance raises concerns about the institution's genuine commitment to diversity and inclusion (University of Manitoba, 2020). Alfred problematized this dynamic by highlighting how the predominance of whiteness in academia perpetuates systemic inequities, placing undue burdens on faculty of colour to address

diversity issues while their white counterparts often remain disengaged (Jenkins & Alfred, 2018). This scenario not only marginalizes the voices of racialized faculty but also reinforces existing power structures that hinder genuine institutional transformation. Therefore, Najib, Albert, and Loren recommended that leadership can take a proactive stance on EDI by transforming existing hiring practices and enacting a cultural shift by recruiting more racialized faculty members and administrators to serve as role models and mentors. Representation matters, and having a diverse faculty helps foster a greater sense of belonging among students, who often seek validation and guidance from their professors. Additionally, ensuring that university leadership reflects the diversity of its student body would send a powerful message that UM values the contributions of racialized individuals at all levels of the institution. Further to this, in developing or maintaining an EDI action plan, institutions such as UM may consider welcoming student voices, especially from underrepresented groups, through inclusive consultation processes.

Enhancing Safe Spaces and Inclusive Pedagogy

The participants of the study revealed that they felt alienation, microaggressions, and exclusion within academic spaces. This can undermine their sense of belonging, a crucial factor in student engagement and success. Safe spaces, where students can express themselves without fear of denigration and marginalization, are integral to fostering a sense of belonging. Many participants shared that classrooms often did not feel like safe spaces, and they felt marginalized or dismissed when contributing to discussions. Several participants advocated that policies institutionalizing the creation of safe academic environments could be bolstered to address this challenge. For example, Najib and Loren endorsed the idea of the university choosing to protect academic freedom grounded on principles aligned with applicable Canadian laws and human rights conventions, allowing individuals to bravely share their voices to the extent it can afford

others' sentiments. In that case, establishing safe academic environments might require enmeshing brave space to an extent that prioritizes and sustains all students' epistemic and emotional safety for participating in all facets of learning under the unified identity of "learners," emphasizing their unique needs. However, this protective measure for safe space requires immense awareness and learning for optimal outcomes.

Hossain, Pari, and Behzad put forward that UM could implement "faculty innovation labs"—an event for professional learning communities—aiming to convey the challenges likely to arise when instructors facilitate the learning of increasingly diverse groups of students, with special attention to inclusive pedagogy and cultural competency. Faculty members from different departments would have an opportunity to discuss their lived experiences, perspectives, and innovative, proactive strategies to create safe space by implementing inclusive pedagogy. These labs would help instructors to handle the complexities of diversity in the classroom and ensure that all students feel respected and heard. For instance, the inclusion of race, gender, and sexual orientation within this initiative would be critical, as many students in the study felt that these aspects of their identities were overlooked or dismissed. To further enhance the impact of this initiative, as introduced by Loren, Albert, and Rahi, a dual approach combining faculty-led and student-led workshops could be incorporated, ensuring that faculty engagement goes beyond theoretical discussions and directly integrates student perspectives. While faculty-led workshops might provide valuable insights, they might not always be perceived as effective enough, as faculty members could be resistant to or disengaged from such interventions. In contrast, student-led dialogues—where racialized students share their lived experiences—might bridge this gap by offering firsthand accounts of the challenges these students face, making inclusive teaching practices more tangible and impactful. The inclusion of student-led sessions would

ensure that faculty hear directly from those most affected, fostering a deeper sense of accountability and reflection. Additionally, a faculty mentorship program could be introduced, where senior faculty members with expertise in inclusive pedagogy mentor their colleagues, fostering long-term engagement with equity-focused teaching strategies. Such initiatives would offer a way for the university to act upon the EDI principle of integrating inclusive excellence throughout the university's teaching and research by engaging with faculty and students.

Institutional Commitment to Inclusive Curriculum Development

A significant finding of the study was perceived Eurocentricism in the curriculum, which often excluded non-Western perspectives and contributed to racialized students' feelings of alienation. This possibly affected their sense of belonging, as students who do not see themselves or their cultures represented in the curriculum are likely to feel disconnected from their academic environment. A limited number of participants suggested that the university could establish a "curriculum diversity committee," composed of faculty, students, members from the academic governance body, and external diversity experts, to review and recommend refinement to the curriculum. This committee would ensure that racialized students' experiences, perspectives, and knowledge systems are valued and integrated into the academic fabric of UM, fostering a more inclusive and representative learning environment.

Furthermore, curriculum reform could be intensified towards student-centered, in consultation with racialized and other marginalized students who could discuss how to make learning spaces more inclusive. Such reforms would align with the findings that highlighted the importance of belonging for academic success. When students see their identities and cultural backgrounds reflected in the content they study, they are more likely to feel a sense of ownership and connection to their academic journey (Florian & Beaton, 2018).

Practical Implications for University Stakeholders

Implications for Instructors' Professional Responsibilities

The study findings emphasize the pivotal role of instructors in fostering equitable learning environments that address breaches of safe space and the exclusion of racialized international and racialized immigrant students in academic settings. Hossain's experience of epistemic silencing and Albert's struggles with the dominance of majority-culture students illustrate how power imbalances can inhibit marginalized students' ability to contribute meaningfully to collaborative and classroom activities. Participant accounts frequently indicated that such dynamics necessitated that instructors actively intervene to ensure that all voices were recognized and valued, rather than rely on passive facilitation—an approach where instructors tend to adopt a hands-off role, allowing classroom dynamics to unfold without addressing power imbalances or disruptions to inclusive dialogue. This form of facilitation often assumes that students will self-regulate discussions equitably, but it can reinforce existing hierarchies and marginalization rather than fostering meaningful engagement. Anderson (2021) underscored that safe spaces are not solely about emotional comfort but also about fostering epistemic justice by countering power imbalances and amplifying marginalized perspectives.

Instructors bear the responsibility to establish and maintain classroom environments that promote inclusivity while upholding academic rigor. By understanding and disrupting the traditional "uses" of institutional spaces and norms, educators can contribute to more equitable and inclusive educational experiences (Ahmed, 2019). This includes implementing clear, enforceable guidelines for group work and participation to prevent dominant voices from overshadowing others, as they did in Albert's accounts of exclusion in collaborative settings. Fostering critical awareness of privilege, power, and social positioning is crucial in addressing

the barriers that impede equitable participation. As Piquemal et al. (2021) noted, such efforts are integral to promoting respectful and meaningful engagement across diverse identities in educational spaces.

Balancing the imperative of safe spaces with the pedagogical value of intellectual challenge is a nuanced but essential task for instructors. While discomfort is often necessary for fostering critical dialogue, instructors must differentiate between productive discomfort that facilitates growth and harmful dynamics that perpetuate exclusion. Addressing this balance, instructors can design curricula that integrate Canadian-specific content with global perspectives, as suggested by participants like Aarvi and Albert. This approach not only would enrich the academic experience but also ensure that the curriculum reflects the diverse identities and lived experiences of the student body (Filomeno & Brown, 2022; Ma, 2018).

Proactively addressing classroom microaggressions is another vital component of instructors' responsibilities. Educators must anticipate potential breaches of safety and set explicit norms for respectful dialogue, reducing the burden on marginalized students to reclaim their own space. Strategies such as modeling civility, preemptively mitigating microaggressions, and integrating anti-oppressive pedagogical frameworks are essential to creating a supportive academic environment. As research has indicated, instructors must not only address incidents of incivility but also actively work to dismantle systemic inequities that marginalize certain groups. This dual focus underscores the need for professional practices that uphold dignity, foster inclusive participation, and contribute to the broader goals of equity and justice in education (Callan, 2011; Piquemal et al., 2021).

Creating BIPOC Agency Platform

A subset of participants called for forming a platform emphasizing equity-seeking groups to enhance institutional efforts toward equity and inclusion. For instance, creating a BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Colour) agency platform would significantly contribute to fostering a sense of belonging, safe space, and inclusivity within learning communities by providing a tailored, visible support network for marginalized groups and addressing the systemic attitudinal barriers faced by BIPOC individuals. A dedicated BIPOC agency platform could offer a secure, culturally sensitive reporting space where BIPOC students, faculty, and staff feel their voices will be heard and validated. For example, the platform might include anonymous reporting options, counseling resources, and advocacy channels, allowing individuals to voice concerns without fear of repercussion. A BIPOC agency platform would facilitate authentic, contextually relevant discussions of racism, particularly anti-Indigenous and anti-Black racism, which are perceived to be politicized in broader EDI conversations. This platform could create targeted educational initiatives, such as workshops and speaker series, focusing explicitly on the historical and structural inequities affecting BIPOC communities. The platform could address the complex intersectionality within BIPOC communities by offering support that considers multiple identities and experiences. For example, an initiative could include mentorship programs that connect BIPOC students with faculty and alumni who have similar racial, cultural, sexual orientation, and gendered experiences. Such mentorship not only would promote professional growth but also would allow BIPOC individuals to see themselves represented and understood within the institution. For a queer Black student or a disabled Indigenous faculty member, these connections could provide critical support that fosters a genuine sense of belonging and recognition.

Peer-Led Initiatives and Affinity Groups

The peer dynamic can play a significant role in either enhancing or undermining the sense of belonging for racialized students. A considerable portion of participants in this study found solace and community through racial mirrors in affinity groups, which provided them with the emotional and psychological safety that they often perceived they lacked in classroom settings within native and non-native student populations. Students' formation of informal affinity groups allowed them to engage with peers who shared similar experiences of marginalization, fostering a greater sense of belonging (Mahar et al., 2013).

Several participants pointed out that UM could formalize support for affinity groups, providing funding, space, and resources to ensure their flourishing. Peer-led initiatives, such as mentorship programs between senior and junior racialized students, could also be implemented. These initiatives would help incoming students navigate the university environment, reducing feelings of isolation and promoting a sense of community. The importance of belonging is evident here, as students who feel supported by their peers are more likely to engage in academic and social activities, enhancing their overall university experience.

In addition, Najib, Albert, Robert, and Loren suggested that UM could launch university-wide campaigns that promote peer inclusivity, encouraging students from all backgrounds to engage with diversity in a meaningful way. For example, UM could host open house meetings and roundtable discussions (both in-person and remote) where students could speak directly with university leaders about issues related to inclusivity. This would create a platform where voices could be heard, concerns validated, and actions discussed. Creating spaces (both physical and digital) where students can openly discuss their experiences and learn from one another by initiating inclusive storytelling through real student narratives would contribute to a more

cohesive and inclusive student body, ultimately strengthening the sense of belonging, membership, and community for racialized students.

Research Implications

Expanding Research on Intersectionality in Higher Education

The study underscored the importance of understanding the intersectionality of race, gender, and sexuality in shaping the experiences of racialized students. Research that fails to account for these intersections risks oversimplifying the challenges faced by marginalized groups. This study has a drawback since it could manage non-significant participants from non-binary gender groups, limiting the discussion from an intersectional perspective more rigorously. The increasing representation of a wider range of sexual orientations within student populations necessitates additional research to investigate the impact of these intersecting identities on students' feelings of belongingness, the availability of safe environments, and their academic achievements within varied educational contexts.

Future research at UM—some of which could be conducted at faculty development offices—could focus on comparative studies between racialized students with different intersecting identities, such as socioeconomic, cultural, and ideological, to better understand the nuanced barriers they face. This would provide valuable insights into how different facets of identity interact to shape students' experiences and how EDI efforts can be tailored to meet their specific needs. The goal would be to create a more comprehensive understanding of the barriers to belonging and how institutional policies can be adapted to address these challenges.

Longitudinal Studies on Racialized Students' Progress

Given that sense of belonging is a dynamic experience that evolves over time, longitudinal research would provide critical insights into the long-term impacts of EDI initiatives

on racialized students. Tracking students' academic progress, mental health, and sense of belonging over several years would help identify which interventions are most effective in fostering inclusion and which areas require further attention.

Such research could also explore how the academic and social experiences of racialized students change as they progress through different stages of their education, including the transition period for newcomer racialized students. Are EDI initiatives effective in these students' early academic years, or do they struggle more as they advance to higher levels of study? Understanding these patterns would help UM develop more targeted and effective EDI strategies, ensuring that students feel a sense of belonging throughout their academic journey.

This study's implications extend beyond individual experiences; they offer a roadmap for transforming the university into a more inclusive and supportive academic space. UM has the potential to become a leader in advancing EDI, but this will require sustained commitment, accountability, and action from all institutional levels. With the comprehensible concerns for sense of belonging, safe space, and inclusive pedagogy and their meaningful and student-centered attachment to the fabric of the university, UM can ensure the success and well-being of its diverse student population.

The following chapter concludes this dissertation with a depiction of the study summary, along with its limitations and final thoughts.

Chapter Six

Conclusion and Limitations

Introduction

This dissertation set out to explore the intricate experiences of racialized immigrant and racialized international students in higher education (HE), particularly how their intersecting identities—race, gender, and sexual orientation—shape their sense of belonging, safety, and academic engagement. Drawing on qualitative phenomenological case study research, this investigation at the University of Manitoba offers critical insights into the structural and interpersonal barriers these students face. Through in-depth interviews, thematic analysis, and applying an array of theoretical frameworks, the findings illuminate the systemic nature of exclusion within academic environments and how institutional practices often perpetuate inequities despite public commitments to EDI.

Summary of Findings

The research revealed that racialized students frequently experience marginalization in academic and social contexts. Key themes include the dominance of and/or disposition to Eurocentrism in curricula and the complexities involved in cultivating safe spaces within classroom settings. These issues holistically affect the sense of belonging of racialized immigrant and international students in graduate programs. The study also highlighted the challenges institutions face in fully acknowledging and integrating the cultural and intellectual contributions of marginalized students. Many participants felt alienated in classrooms where their perspectives were often dismissed or ignored, contributing to a diminished sense of belonging. The study found that social exclusion was not only evident in academic settings but also extended to peer relationships and group projects, where racialized students reported feeling left out or

undervalued. In addition to these barriers, the intersectionality of race, gender, and sexual orientation compounded these challenges. The study also highlighted the resilience of these students, many of whom developed coping strategies to navigate their hostile academic environments. Students found refuge in affinity groups, peer networks, and supportive faculty members, who played a crucial role in affirming their identities and experiences. These findings are instrumental for refining EDI strategies and making them more responsive to the actual needs of marginalized students.

Study Opportunities

This study provides valuable insights into the experiences of racialized immigrant and racialized international students in HE; however, it also opens several avenues for further research. First, as this research was conducted within a single institution, UM, future studies could expand to multiple universities across different regions to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how racialized students navigate belonging, safe space, and inclusive pedagogy in varied institutional contexts. Additionally, this study did not include participants from differently abled groups as part of its inclusivity framework. Future research could build upon this work by exploring the intersection of racialized identity and disability to better understand how diverse students experience inclusion and exclusion within HE settings.

Another significant opportunity lies in methodological expansion. This study relied on data that was self-reported through interviews, a common approach in phenomenological research that captures subjective experiences in depth. While self-reporting may be influenced by individual framing and social expectations, the study took measures to ensure data accuracy through participant validation. Future studies could complement self-reported narratives with ethnographic observations or longitudinal studies to further validate participants' accounts and

explore how experiences of belonging evolve over time. Additionally, this research focused primarily on graduate students, whose academic and social dynamics may differ from those of undergraduate students. Extending the scope to include undergraduate perspectives would provide a broader understanding of student experiences at different levels of higher education.

Furthermore, this study's exploration of belonging, safe space, and inclusive pedagogy is deeply embedded in institutional and disciplinary contexts. While the research maintained a sound representation of participants across the university, as recommended by Noon (2018) for phenomenological case studies, further research could explore how these experiences vary across disciplines, institutional sizes, and faculty compositions. Investigating how academic rigor, faculty diversity, and program structures influence racialized students' sense of belonging would contribute to a more nuanced understanding of systemic barriers and facilitators of inclusion in higher education.

Despite these contextual considerations, this study makes significant scholarly contributions by advancing theoretical discussions on exclusion and marginalization in higher education, mobilizing CRT, validation theory, integration theory, and ecological systems theory. It highlights how systemic racism and cultural exclusion manifest both explicitly and subtly—through microaggressions in classroom discussions, marginalization in group projects, and the predominance of Eurocentric curricula (Brunette-Debassige et al., 2022; Zembylas, 2018). These findings enrich ongoing discussions on whiteness in academic spaces and the ways institutions may perpetuate exclusionary practices, even while outwardly promoting diversity and inclusion. Furthermore, the study's application of intersectionality—considering the intersections of race, gender, and sexuality—adds depth to the current literature on student belonging. By centering the voices of marginalized students, this research lays the groundwork for further studies that can

explore innovative pedagogical strategies to create truly inclusive and affirming learning environments to advance EDI initiatives.

Final Thoughts

As HEIs grapple with the ongoing challenges of diversity and inclusion, this study's findings provide a roadmap for how universities can thrive in their efforts to engage in more transformative EDI practices. Central to this transformation is the idea that inclusion must be both structural and cultural. Universities need to recognize that creating diverse student bodies is only the first step; the real work lies in fostering environments where all students, particularly those from marginalized groups, feel seen, heard, and valued.

The participants in this study perceived that racialized students are not passive recipients of exclusion but active agents who navigate and challenge the barriers they encounter during their academic journey. Their resilience and strategies for coping with exclusion, from forming affinity groups to engaging in academic masking, offer important lessons for universities aiming to become truly inclusive spaces. However, it should not be the responsibility of marginalized students to overcome these barriers alone. Instead, institutions must take the lead in dismantling the structural inequalities perpetuating exclusion and marginalization. I contend the future of EDI efforts in HE lies in a commitment to constant reflection, listening, and adaptation. Universities should reinforce the actualization of a commitment to listening to the perspectives of their most marginalized students and consider implementing substantive changes informed by their experiences. This requires a shift in institutional culture, where diversity will not simply imply a matter of celebration but will be integrated into every aspect of academic life–from curricula to pedagogical practices to student support services.

This dissertation offers several takeaways for educators, policymakers, and institutions committed to fostering EDI in HE. Creating meaningful, inclusive pedagogical environments requires institutions to prioritize safe spaces, especially in terms of epistemic and emotional safety, where students from all backgrounds feel heard, respected, and valued, fostering their sense of belonging. At the heart of this research is the call for educational systems to be more adaptable, flexible, and attuned to the realities of an increasingly diverse student population instead of creating an uneven learning environment that provides an epistemic advantage to individuals from socially privileged groups (Bailey, 2014). Racialized students should not feel the need to compromise their identities to succeed academically. Instead, academic institutions must embrace these identities as sources of strength and richness because diversity is essential within the university setting; it brings varied perspectives that enrich and support the advancement of knowledge (Cameron, 2014). In doing so, universities will not only enhance the academic experience for marginalized students but will also foster a more vibrant and inclusive academic community for all.

In conclusion, this dissertation has shown that, while racialized students face significant challenges in HE, there is also immense potential for institutions to become more inclusive when they embrace the changes by addressing all the challenges of the learning community, especially the equity-seeking groups, in all ways possible. By recognizing the diversity of student experiences and identities, universities can create environments where all students can thrive academically, socially, and personally. This is not just a matter of policy—it is a moral imperative for any institution committed to fostering EDI. As the world continues to grapple with issues of social justice and equity, this dissertation serves as a reminder of the transformative potential of HE. When institutions commit to creating inclusive and supportive environments,

they can empower all students—regardless of diverse demographics—to reach their full potential. This is the challenge that lies ahead, and it is one that cannot be ignored.

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Appendix (A) - Interview Protocol



Faculty of Education
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Interview Guide and Questions

This interview session will be conducted in a one-on-one format and will ask a set of predetermined questions since it is a semi-structured interview. The interviewer (Principal Investigator-PI) will be using those questions along with probing and contextual and/or situational questions. The participants will be answering to share their perceptions and experiences in their accounts. The interviewer (PI) will be probing contingent upon the participant's answers, expression, and volume of tone and/or will ask supplementary questions for clarification. The session will be conducted remotely and recorded on the University of Manitoba (UM) approved Zoom platform for approximately 60 minutes. The date and time will be set up as suggested by the participants.

At the outset and during the interview:

1. Greet the respective participant. Explain the purpose of the study, the importance of their participation and the expected duration of the interview. Additionally, I will double-check if the individual wish to turn the camera on, then recording will proceed with/without the camera turned on.
2. Despite their agreement to participate, participants should be reminded that they can skip any questions that make them uncomfortable and can withdraw at any moment without being penalized. Then after having a brief talk about the effect of reviewing and signing the consent form, if the participants do not have any questions at that point, they will be asked whether they are ready to begin the interview.
3. Introduce the participant and the interviewer, and initiate a friendly conversation by asking non-directive and descriptive opening questions. Here, the goal is to make the participant feels comfortable.
4. Start asking focus questions based on the rapport that has been built (for example; "I am interested in…..As you know, this study is about….")

5. Ask probe questions to encourage the participants to elaborate on participants' accounts and to find out what participants really think about and make meaning of the topic of inquiry (for example, 'tell me more about this' or 'describe what that felt like to you' or 'I don't understand, can you explain this to me?').
6. Control the interviewer's tone of voice and language, and remain as neutral as possible when asking questions or probing on issues.
7. Keep the focus on the topic of inquiry and complete the interview within the agreed time limit.
8. Ensure proper recording without distracting the participant; for example, checking the interviewer's notes that will be taken in hand-written form and ensuring audio/video recording is taken place properly.
9. Complete the session, make sure all questions have been asked, thank the participants, and ask if participants have any questions or something else to say about the issue we have discussed.

Demographic Questions:

First, I would like to ask you a few background questions:

1. Do you identify as a racialized person?
2. What is your race/ethnicity?
3. Are you an immigrant student or an international student?
4. What is your gender identity? Like, male/female/non-binary/trans/gender diverse.
5. Which term best describes your sexual orientation? (if you have)
   Like, Bisexual, Gay/Homosexual, Heterosexual/Straight, Lesbian, Queer or Two-Spirit or something other you would like to mention.
6. Which program are you studying?
7. How many years have you completed in your program?
8. Which faculty or department are you studying?

Well, let's discuss our interview questions.

Interview Questions:

As you know, I am interested in university students' perceptions and experiences of a sense of belonging, safety, and inclusive pedagogy.

1. Let's start by telling me a bit about yourself, where you are from, what makes you feel interested in this study, and what you think about studying the program in this faculty. How has your experience (e.g., academic, social and alike) been so far in studying at this university?
2. How do you define a sense of belonging? What does make you feel that you belong in the class, and what do you think does not feel like you belong in the classroom? Give me a specific example of belonging at the university.
3. How do you define safe space in education in your classes? Have you felt unsafe in your classroom? Why have you felt like that; give me an example. What have you done to deal with unsafe instances?
4. How do you define inclusive pedagogy? Can you tell me a little about your instructor's approaches that you like and do not like, and why you like them and why you do not like them?
5. Have you ever seen any context or the topic of your course or course-related materials represent any of your cultural aspects? That gives you the feeling that it is talking about you. Any classroom activities that make you feel included, worry-free and safe to bring your own perspectives or share your own thoughts? You can take a few moments to recall and talk about these things.
6. How do you find your teachers and peers cooperative regardless of your identity (like race, gender and/or sexual orientation) within the classroom?
7. Do your experiences differ due to your identity while interacting with students with different identities than what you have? How would you see or explain the experiences? Let's say, (example of prompts), being a lesbian black woman, what does your experience look like while interacting with others, including your teacher and peers from different backgrounds? Could you please give me any examples of those experiences? If you have any experience within the classroom, that would be great; if not, no problem, just share what you have.

7.1 What do you think, if any reasons might cause such experiences? What would be the solution to this problem as per your concern? What strategy do you follow to handle such experiences? (few examples of probing).

8. What strategies have your teachers employed that make you feel safe and belong in the classroom? How do your instructors attempt to accommodate students with different backgrounds while teaching in a diversified classroom?
9. What strategies have your teachers employed in the class that you feel you are included? Give an example of instances where you feel and do not feel included?
10. How would you practice the inclusive pedagogy approach in your classroom if you were the course instructor? Or, From your perspective, what would be helpful practices?
11. What are the opportunities the university provides as their strength and capacity to help you develop the strategies to navigate the experiences during your academic life?
12. How would you evaluate those practices/events/activities regarded as opportunities from your graduate school and university to promote a sense of belonging and safety and ensure your involvement in inclusive pedagogy?

Closing: As we conclude the session, I would say, is there anything else that you believe is pertinent to our conversation but that we have not yet discussed? Please (briefly) explain.

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study and giving me time out of your day. I can well understand how busy your schedule must be, so I am grateful to you.

Have a wonderful time, and Thanks again!!

Appendix (B) - Participant Consent Form

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Research Project Title: Racialized immigrant and racialized international students' perceptions and experiences of sense of belonging, safety and inclusive pedagogy: A phenomenological case study.

Principal Investigator and contact information: Md Nazim Mahmud, Ph.D. candidate, Faculty of Education, University of Manitoba. Email: mahmudm1@myumanitoba.ca.

Research Supervisor and contact information: Dr. Nathalie Piquemal, Professor, Faculty of Education, University of Manitoba. Email: nathalie.piquemal@umanitoba.ca.

This consent form, a copy of which will be left with you for your records and reference, is only part of the process of informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

1. **Purpose of the research:** The study tends to explore racialized immigrant and racialized international students' perceptions and experiences of belongingness, safe space and inclusive pedagogy in higher education (HE) at the University of Manitoba (UM). Racialized sexual and gender diversity perspectives will be embedded in what this study particularly looks into. For example, the study will be conducted to learn: what are the perceptions and experiences of racialized immigrant and racialized international students' sense of belonging, safe space and inclusive pedagogy in higher education? What are the factors either hinder or promote their sense of belonging and experience of safe space and inclusive pedagogy, and what strategies have they developed in response to these specific

experiences? And lastly, what can we learn from those students' experiences to help refine EDI approaches and practices?

2. **Procedures:** My plan for the study involves a qualitative, phenomenological case study approach to data collection and analysis. Through a recruitment flyer, I will employ twenty participants who identify themselves as racialized immigrant or racialized international students. After completing the recruitment procedure, I will schedule each participant to conduct one-on-one (semi-structured) interview sessions. I will begin the session by asking a few demographic questions relating to participants' race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, program of study and faculty/department, followed by a discussion of a series of predefined questions. During interview sessions, I will be discussing how the participants define sense of belonging, safety and inclusive pedagogy, what the underlying factors hinder or promote participants' sense of belonging and safety, how participants deal with instances in which participants feel not belonged and unsafe, how teachers and university accommodate participants in the same instances, how inclusive pedagogy is practised in the classroom, how participants undergo experience(s) (if any) that caused by the multiple identities (e.g., being a lesbian-woman and black) participants have, what the opportunities university offer while dealing with such experiences and how participants evaluate those opportunities. Each interview session will last approximately 60 minutes and will be recorded in audio/video format using the UM-approved Zoom platform. In the end, collected data via interview will be transcribed and analyzed qualitatively using thematic analysis to answer the research questions.
3. **Recording device:** The UM Zoom virtual platform will enable audio/video interviews. You will be asked to turn on the camera during the session; however, I will certainly accommodate your wishes if you choose not to turn the camera on. Please understand that I will not give any other alternatives for data collecting besides recording our discussion and that audio and video data will be analyzed from this conversation. If this is acceptable, please tick/check the box to indicate your consent for the audio/video recording of the interview: ☐
4. **Benefits:** The followings are the direct and indirect benefits to participants:
    - There are no direct benefits associated with participation in this study.

- As indirect benefits, you may find it interesting to share their thoughts, experiences and knowledge. As of this consequence, you, along with the forthcoming students, will benefit once the overall institutional system – to a great extent – improves and advances the well-being of students from diverse demographics.

5. **Potential risks and mitigation measures:** I think the risks to you are minimal since participation in this study is voluntary. However, you may likely experience some degree of psychological or emotional trauma during the interview as you relive some of the painful experiences you have had to confront, which could impact your mental health. Given that, the measures stated below will be undertaken:
    - If reliving specific situations causes you to feel emotionally or psychologically distressed, I will initially ask if you need a moment to collect yourself. I will then ask whether you like to continue or if you would prefer to go on to the next question. I will also remind you that you have the option to withdraw if the subject of the questions is too painful.
    - In addition, for this potential risk, provisions have been provided for persons who willingly seek emotional assistance from a counsellor during or after the interview session. You will be advised to contact the University Counseling Center for assistance. Those who feel uncomfortable with this internal University Service will be referred to AURORA FAMILY THERAPY CENTER in Winnipeg, which provides this specialized service. AURORA Family Therapy Center provides important counselling services to vulnerable demographic groups in Manitoba, particularly newcomers, including new immigrants, refugees, and international students. They do not charge those without the capacity to pay for their services who utilize them. The address of the center is 491 Portage Avenue, 5th Floor, Winnipeg, Manitoba R3B 2E4. As a PI, I have contacted the Center's Management and Counseling Teams, and they have committed to giving these services to any of the study participants that I refer to the center.
6. **Protecting participants' confidentiality/Data management:** The data collected from you via the interview session and, later, the transcripts will be kept strictly confidential and stored on UM approved platform since the nature of the data is directly and indirectly identifiable. For example, your audio/video recording – recognized as directly identifiable

– during the interview will be stored in encrypted mode on Microsoft SharePoint since these recordings possibly require ample space for their size. Data generated from your audio/video recording as a part of the transcription process will be protected by assigning a pseudonym in place of your actual name (A/One male/female student/participant called 'Peace', A/One queer/lesbian/gay/bisexual/two-spirit student/participant named 'Smile'), and coded and encrypted as transcription progresses. The transcription will be conducted manually by me. All identifying and non-identifying data – except audio/video recordings – will be stored and kept separate from linked data in Microsoft Teams and retained and managed from Microsoft Teams according to the UM's data storage policies. After me, there is no other person except my research supervisor who will have access to the most likely coded data (e.g., transcriptions).

7. **Credit/Remuneration for participation:** You will be offered a Tim Hortons e-gift card of 15 dollars as a token of appreciation for participating in this study. You will receive the card electronically through email as soon as I have your signed consent form. You can keep the gift card even if you decide to withdraw from the study.
8. **Withdrawal from the study:** If you wish to withdraw from the study after the interview, please email me to inform me of your decision. You are able to withdraw at any time until August 2023, when data analysis is anticipated to begin.

   Even if you decide to withdraw during the interview session, you may reach me via UM Zoom chat or my cell phone number. Of note, in the event that an unexpected technical malfunction interrupts your participation during the interview, which could lead to a misunderstanding that you wish to withdraw, please contact me immediately by phoning or texting the number provided. With respect to your withdrawal, please rest assured that all of your data will be destroyed from the research database.
9. **Feedback:** After transcribing your interview audio/video recordings, the transcript will be forwarded via UM email to you for member-checking, which would require some time (approximately 30 minutes) of your day. The intention is to verify that you are satisfied with the transcription and that it accurately reflects what was discussed in the interview. However, it is an optional activity for you. Depending on my (Principal Investigator-PI) workload, you will expect to receive the transcriptions once they are ready about one/two

weeks following the interviews. If I do not hear from you within fourteen days of providing the transcript, it will be assumed that the transcript has been approved as it is.

10. **Dissemination research results:** I would like to disseminate the study results, including an anonymized summary and/or direct quotations of participants using only pseudonyms or general descriptors as a report to the university authority, especially the dedicated facility works for EDI (equity, diversity and inclusion). The reason it will be disseminated is to help inform how racialized immigrant and racialized international students experience and navigate their academic life amid the increasing maneuver for EDI.

    Likely, the study result will produce academic papers to be published in peer-reviewed journals and presented in academic seminars to impart knowledge, exchange insights and contribute to the EDI literature for those who either in Canada or internationally work for EDI in higher education. Finally, the research results will be documented in an academic report (i.e., dissertation paper) to submit to Mspace of UM.

11. **Providing participants with the summary of findings:** If you have indicated that you would like a summary of my study findings, I will send you a 1-3 page summary once the study's data collection and analysis phases have been completed. I assume that this will be happened by October 2023. Please tick/check the box to indicate any of the following means you choose to receive the summary document:

    ☐ UM email ☐ Mail (Canada Post)

    If you tick/check the "Mail" option, please write your address:

    _____

12. **Data destruction:** The audio/video recordings of your interview session will be deleted permanently after the completion of transcription and obtaining the member-checking feedback (no later than September 2023). The transcripts generated from the audio/video recordings will also be destroyed permanently by January 2028. All identifying data will be destroyed by January 2028.

Signature Section

Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in the research project and agree to participate as a subject. It also implies that you consent to be quoted and that you are aware that, as previously stated, a pseudonym will be assigned to protect your identity. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the researchers, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time, and /or refrain from answering any questions you prefer to omit, without prejudice or consequence. Your continued participation should be as informed as your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

This research has been approved by the Research Ethics Board at the University of Manitoba, Fort Garry campus. If you have any concerns or complaints about this project, you may contact any of the above-named persons or the Human Ethics Officer at 204-474-7122 or HumanEthics@umanitoba.ca. A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.

Participant's signature: **Date:**

Researcher's signature: **Date:**

Appendix (C) - Participant Recruitment Flyer



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Md Nazim Mahmud, a Ph.D. candidate at the Faculty of Education, the University of Manitoba, is conducting a research study to delve into racialized immigrant and racialized international students' perception and experience of a sense of belonging, safety and inclusive pedagogy within the classroom setting. Dr. Nathalie Piquemal, Professor, Faculty of Education, the University of Manitoba (Phone: +1 204-474-7032 and email: nathalie.piquemal@umanitoba.ca), is supervising the research study. The Research Ethics Board-2 at the Fort Garry campus of the University of Manitoba has approved the research.

You may be eligible to participate in this study

I am interested in talking to immigrant* and international* graduate students (studying in Master or Ph.D. programs) who have already completed one year of their program. This study also seeks out students who identify as racialized* persons, and their identity will include gender diversity (male/female/non-binary/trans) and/or sexual orientation (e.g., 2LGBTQ+). I intend to learn about their academic experiences that might be influenced due to having multiple identities (e.g., being black and lesbian-woman). Study participants will be asked to participate in individual interviews (audio/video recorded) to answer a few demographic questions and discuss a set of predetermined questions relating to their perceptions and experience.

With the compliance of protecting participants' confidentiality and privacy, your participation in the study is entirely voluntary, and you can withdraw at any point without any penalty. Your time commitment to this study is approximately 60 minutes for the interview session that will be conducted using UM Zoom platform at your convenient time. All the information obtained in the interview will be stored on a UM-approved platform. You will receive a complimentary e-gift card in appreciation of your time and participation in this study. There are no consequences for choosing not to participate.

Interested in participating in this study? Have questions?

Please feel free to reach out to me: Md Nazim Mahmud at mahmudm1@myumanitoba.ca

Take the flyer and think about it.

***** Please see the flip side of the flyer

***Racialized Person**

As per Statistics Canada, racialized persons is a term used to describe the identities of those who may have experienced the social effects of marginalization based on notions of race, ethnicity, or "origin."

***Immigrant Student**

Individuals who are, or who have ever been, *landed immigrants* or *permanent residents* are 'immigrants' and get enrolled in educational institutions are immigrant students. Both of these categories of students are identified as racialized due to having phenotype and cultural characteristics such as skin tone, accent or manner of speech, name, clothing, diet, beliefs and practices, places of origin and the like.

***International Student**

International students are defined as non-Canadian students who do not have "permanent resident" status and have had to obtain the Canadian government's authorization (study permit/student visa) to enter Canada to pursue an education. This study includes racialized international students attributed to this category because of their race marked by skin colour, language, culture, and way of being.

Appendix (D) - Request Letter for Circulating Recruitment Flyer



Faculty of Education
Education Building
71 Curry Place
University of Manitoba (Fort Garry campus)
Winnipeg, MB R3T 2N2 Canada

Email Subject Line: *Here's a chance to participate in a research study for the students to share experiences and perspectives that should bring into the light.*

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Supervisor
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Professor
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Dear XXXX,

My name is Md Nazim Mahmud, a Ph.D. candidate at the Faculty of Education, the University of Manitoba. I am conducting a doctoral research study titled "Racialized immigrant and racialized international students' perceptions and experiences of sense of belonging, safety and inclusive pedagogy: A phenomenological case study." I am interested in learning how racialized immigrant and racialized international students perceive and experience a sense of belonging, safe space and inclusive pedagogy within the classroom setting. My exploration also involves identifying the factors that either hinder or promote their sense of belonging and experience of safe space and inclusive pedagogy and what strategies they have developed in response to these specific experiences. And finally, I would like to see what we can learn from those students' experiences to help refine equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) approaches and practices undertaken by the University of Manitoba (UM).

I am recruiting twenty participants with racialized, gender and sexual identities to sign up for individual interview sessions. Their participation includes as follows:

- participating in semi-structured interviews (conducted on UM Zoom platform) that last for 60 minutes and are scheduled at their convenient time. The interviews will be audio/video

recorded with participant's prior knowledge since the audio and video data will be analyzed.

- first, the participants will be asked a few demographic questions relating to participants' race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, program of study and faculty/department, followed by a discussion of a series of predefined questions.
- interview discussion will be addressing how the participants define sense of belonging, safety and inclusive pedagogy, what the underlying factors hinder or promote participants' sense of belonging and safety, how participants deal with instances in which participants feel not belonged and unsafe, how teachers and university accommodate participants in the same instances, how inclusive pedagogy is practised in the classroom, how participants undergo experience(s) (if any) that caused by the multiple identities (e.g., being a lesbian-woman and black) participants have, what the opportunities university offer while dealing with such experiences and how participants evaluate those opportunities.
- participants also reserve the right to skip any questions that may make participants uncomfortable, and participants may withdraw from the study at any point before data analysis begins without incurring any penalties.
- participation is absolutely voluntary and therefore has no consequences. However, the participant will be offered a complimentary e-gift card to appreciate the time and involvement.

The following inclusion criteria will determine if participants are the right fit for this study:

- participants who identify as racialized immigrant or racialized international students.
- participation requires the individual who has completed at least one year of the program being studied.

It is worth noting that all information to be collected and discussed in the interview will be kept completely confidential and stored on UM-approved cloud service to protect participants' identities.

I am contacting you to circulate the "Participant Recruitment Flyer" in your institution/group platforms and through your available facilities. You are required to do nothing more than circulate the flyer. Students who fit for the study and are interested in participating in my study will contact me directly via UM email or phone call as provided in the flyer. I will reply to the potential participants stating how to be involved in the study process.

Please note that this study has been approved by Research Ethics Board 2 at the Fort Garry campus, the University of Manitoba.

For your information, I have attached the "Participant Recruitment Flyer" and the "Ethics Approval Letter" to initiate the necessary steps to circulate the flyer within your capacity. Please feel free to contact me should you have any questions; I am an email or phone call away.

Thank you for your time, consideration, and cooperation.

Sincerely,

Md Nazim Mahmud
Ph.D. Candidate, Faculty of Education
University of Manitoba