

Frontiers: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Study Abroad

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Volume 37, Issue 2, pp. 139-165

DOI: [10.36366/frontiers.v37i2.918](https://doi.org/10.36366/frontiers.v37i2.918)

www.frontiersjournal.org



High School Students' Social Networks Abroad: Revisiting Coleman's Three Concentric Circles Model

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Abstract in English

The present study explores the distinct aspects of adolescents' experiences during their stay abroad in comparison to university students. Specifically, it investigates the evolution of adolescents' social networks and questions the applicability of Coleman's (2013) three concentric circles model to high school students. Drawing on the narratives of nine Swiss high school students participating in a bilingual Matura program in the canton de Vaud, along with insights from previous research on adolescents, I propose a novel model to illustrate the development of their social networks in an international setting. This newly developed model serves as a foundation for considering strategies to support adolescents abroad, with a focus on fostering meaningful connections with their peers, fellow international students, local students, and host families.

Abstract in French

Cette étude explore les expériences d'adolescent·e·s pendant leur séjour à l'étranger et les compare à celles des étudiant·e·s universitaires. Plus précisément, elle s'intéresse au développement de la vie sociale des adolescent·e·s et remet en question l'applicabilité du modèle des trois cercles concentriques de Coleman (2013) aux expériences des lycéen·ne·s. En s'appuyant sur les récits de neuf lycéen·ne·s suisses participant à un programme de maturité

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Date of Acceptance: March 15th, 2025

bilingue dans le canton de Vaud, ainsi que sur les résultats de recherches antérieures sur les adolescent·e·s, l'article propose un nouveau modèle pour illustrer le développement de leurs différents réseaux sociaux dans un contexte international. Ce nouveau modèle sert de base pour envisager des stratégies de soutien aux adolescent·e·s à l'étranger, en mettant l'accent sur le développement de liens significatifs avec leurs pairs, les autres étudiant·e·s internationaux, les étudiant·e·s locaux et les familles d'accueil.

Keywords

Adolescents abroad; Coleman's concentric circles model; social networks; support program; Switzerland

1. Introduction: Study Abroad Programs and Research on Adolescents Abroad

In 2014, the canton de Vaud in Switzerland introduced a novel high school degree — a French-English bilingual Matura, primarily comprising a year spent in an English-speaking school. The field of study abroad (SA) has witnessed a surge in research interest, reflecting the unprecedented growth of SA experiences, now commonplace in higher education. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, approximately 220 million students participated in diverse SA programs globally, with a projected annual increase of 4.2%, reaching over 300 million in 2025 and nearly 600 million in 2040 (Calderon, 2018). The proliferation of SA programs in higher education, coupled with the prevailing positive discourse extolling their manifold benefits—ranging from linguistic skills and intercultural competence to enhanced employability and global citizenship (Mitchell & Tyne, 2021) — undoubtedly spurred the development of diverse programs catering to a more varied audience, including younger students. However, such programs for high school students remain relatively uncommon. The bilingual program initiated in the canton de Vaud was among the pioneering efforts targeting high school students in Switzerland. Despite the recent emergence of new programs, similar SA opportunities for high school students continue to be exceptional and research on these distinctive initiatives is scarce, both within Switzerland and more broadly (Elmiger, 2008; Elmiger et al., 2022).

This study draws from a comprehensive investigation that delved into the SA experiences of nine Swiss high school students on a global scale (Ferry-

Meystre, in press). The larger study specifically examined the challenges these students encountered, their coping mechanisms, and the potential implementation of tailored support. The current article is dedicated to illuminating the distinctive aspects of adolescents' stays abroad, drawing comparisons with university students. More precisely, the focus is directed towards the evolution of adolescents' social networks during their time abroad, revisiting Coleman's three concentric circles model with a specific focus on high school students. Extended social networks abroad have repeatedly proven to be the results of students' linguistic improvement (Baker-Smemoe et al., 2014; Kennedy Terry, 2022; McManus, 2019; Mitchell et al., 2017). It is therefore essential to better understand their dynamic and development among adolescents as well.

2. Study Abroad, Social Networks, and Adolescence

2.1. The Central Role of Social Networks While Studying Abroad

In his call to envisage SA students as *whole people* and not as language learners only, Coleman (2013, 2015) underlined the importance of studying students' social networks. In his view, social networks are key to understanding students' global experiences as the development of new social networks is fundamental to learning and transformation while abroad.

If you go abroad as an autonomous individual, then you are free of the constraints of the social identities which your previous social circle imposes upon you. Meeting new people can nurture new activities and new attitudes. This is the fundamental basis of learning through mobility. The new perspectives of new acquaintances allow and prompt you to re-invent yourself. (Coleman, 2015, p. 42)

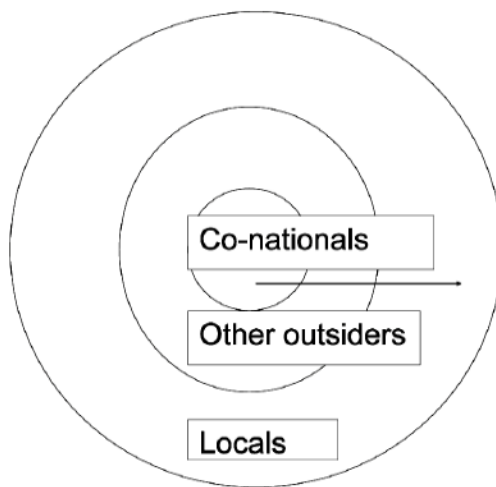
Thus, in an attempt to model socialization patterns while abroad, Coleman (2013, 2015) proposed a concentric circles model (Figure 1) which resulted from his long experience in researching and administering SA.

The model in Figure (1) presents three circles – the inner, middle, and outer circles – and is more concerned with the dynamic of social networks than their intensity. It does not portray a “universal, automatic or uni-directional” (Coleman, 2013, p. 31) process or progression but a general, largely documented tendency. In the middle circle, the other out-group members are often other foreign students, in other words, the international student community. In short,

students first socialize with co-nationals and add other non-locals progressively to their social circles. The addition of locals is only possible with time and if “their own motivations, attitudes, actions and initiatives allow” it (Coleman, 2015, p. 44). Coleman thus insists both on the importance of students’ motivation and agency to move towards the middle and ultimately the outer circle, and on the relevance of preparing students by making them aware of the difficulties they would potentially encounter and suggesting strategies to reach the locals.

FIGURE (1)

THREE CONCENTRIC CIRCLES MODEL (COLEMAN, 2013)



As he himself indicated, Coleman’s model was inspired by previous studies which had already documented a similar progression without turning it into a theoretical model. The most important of them is De Federico de la Rúa’s (2008) study, that examined the social networks of Erasmus students. She collected her data on two different occasions: once in 1995 from 80 students in France, where she was an Erasmus student herself, and a second time in 1999 from 217 students in different European countries. In her analysis, she differentiated “three types of friendship ties” (p. 97) – local people, people from other countries and compatriots – and noted a slow centrifugal movement from the compatriots and internationals to the locals. Compatriots and Erasmus friends satisfy SA students’ “immediate needs” and provide security “by sharing familiar norms and [possibly] the same mother tongue” (p. 101). After these relationships are established, students feel more and more able to access locals. De Federico de la Rúa’s (2008) detailed analysis led her to conclude that there was a predominance of international students in Erasmus students’ social

networks, a conclusion also reached by Murphy-Lejeune (2002) and Patron (2007) before and Van Mol and Michielsen (2015) some years later.

Although the general tendency represented by Coleman's model can be broadly applied to adolescents' experiences and development of social networks, it seems insufficient to represent their complexity and specificities. Thus, this paper proposes an alternative to Coleman's model for high school students considering the experiences narrated by nine Swiss high school students in England and the few previous existing studies on adolescents abroad.

2.2. Specificities of Adolescents' Identities

To start with a general definition, "adolescence encompasses elements of biological growth and major social role transitions, [... it] captures the notion of the growing individual who is able to take increasing responsibility, but who still needs more protection than an adult" (Sawyer et al., 2018, p. 223). Erikson's (1968) theory of the child's psychosocial development and his ground-breaking work, *Identity, Youth and Crisis* described adolescent identity crisis and focused on two processes: crisis and commitment. Identity crisis – which was later called explorations – refers to a period when adolescents are struggling to make decisions about who they wish to be, and explore themselves and their interactions with family, peers, and communities – in other words, their commitments. Adolescents seek to find a comfortable position juggling with social discourses, their parents' and peers' expectations and their own aspirations. In this process of transformation and exploration of the self, Erikson also noted that adolescents can become particularly intolerant to differences as a means of protection. As they face biological and psychological changes and have to redefine their positions in the social world constantly, they often feel the need to identify strongly with some of their peers, which is often combined with the rejection of those who are *different*. "Such intolerance may be, for a while, a necessary defense against a sense of identity loss" (Erikson, 1968, p. 133). Thus, adolescence is a critical stage of life, in which adolescents' sense of self is questioned even in their home language and culture. But what happens when an additional language comes into play adding a new layer to their self and identities? During SA, identity is questioned, and differences are omnipresent. Thus, adolescents' specificities must thus be taken into consideration to better understand – and theorize – the development of their social networks abroad.

2.3. Previous SA Studies Investigating Adolescents Abroad

With the exception of a few studies, very little research has been conducted in the context of high school students going abroad. The dearth of research is certainly due to the scarcity of SA programs for high school students as well as the concentration of scholars in tertiary education where they can find a myriad of research participants. Nonetheless, some studies do exist, with many taking place in Germany, where SA is getting more popular in high school with around 20,000 students went abroad in 2009 (Hübner et al., 2021). Greischel et al. (2018) were among the first psychologists to study adolescent identity development before, during and after SA, with a specific focus on Friends and Home identities, two elements which are known to be the most influential factors on adolescent identity development. They based their study on Crocetti et al.'s (2008) neo-Eriksonian model of identity development in which adolescents “form, evaluate, and revise their identity by processes of commitment, in-depth exploration, and reconsideration of commitments” (p. 2153). Greischel et al. (2018) compared 457 German sojourners who spent a year in 43 different countries mainly outside Europe, to 284 non-sojourners, all aged 15 or 16, measuring commitments and reconsiderations of their social networks six weeks before departure, seven months after their arrival abroad and again seven months after re-entry. The comparison showed a difference between sojourners and non-sojourners' identity trajectories, with the latter remaining quite stable as opposed to the sojourners'. For the adolescents abroad, the authors found strong commitments to home relationships while abroad, which they interpreted as both the need for parents and friends' support while abroad but also potentially “an attempt to distance oneself from becoming immersed in the new culture” (p. 2162). However, once back home, adolescents showed greater reconsiderations of friends and parents, through their taking some distance from different relationships. The authors hypothesized that the sojourn may have led adolescents to reconsider some friendships and that getting back to old friendships may have been a challenge. In addition, the adolescents' distancing from their parents may have mirrored – and potentially accelerate – the natural process of seeking independence.

Before Greischel et al. (2018), Hutteman et al. (2015) had investigated German high school students' self-esteem before and after SA ($N = 876$; medium age = 16). They reported stronger increases of self-esteem for SA participants after the sojourn than for the control group ($n = 714$). Hutteman et al. (2015) also noted a positive correlation between levels of self-esteem and social inclusion

while abroad, highlighting the essential role of social networks during SA. Other studies focused on the development of linguistic skills more specifically. Sauer and Ellis (2019) examined the linguistic gains using CALF (Complexity, Accuracy, Lexis, Fluency) measures of two German teenagers (aged 16 and 17) in New Zealand and compared their test results to the quality of their social life. They reported that both made significant progress in fluency and lexis, and that their progress rate increased significantly when developing relations with local social networks. As for complexity and accuracy, one participant improved on both as well, the second less but her initial proficiency level was already so high that there was not much room left for improvement. Finally, regretting the lack of large-scale studies, Hübner et al. (2021) researched the predictors and effects of SA on German high-school students ($N = 5,361$, 13% went abroad). Students' socioeconomic background emerged as the strongest predictor of SA. Looking at students' standardized achievements, grades and course choice, the results showed positive effects of SA on all outcome variables.

In other countries, a few studies focusing on adolescents abroad can also be found. Perrefort (2008), for example, compared the representations of French high school students in Germany and German university students in France, and noted that the latter tended to portray themselves as marginal spectators, unable to develop meaningful relationships with the locals. Consequently, they drew negative conclusions about their hosts, based on cultural stereotypes and did not identify with them at all. On the other hand, high school students demonstrated more intercultural openness and reported on many different types of interactions with hosts from all generations. These elements allowed a more fruitful experience, at least partially due to their integration within their host families. Host families can play a key role in adolescents' SA experiences. Grieve (2015) measured the use of pragmatic markers typical of adolescent speech among 26 German teenagers (16-17 years old) in Australia and collated it with their relationships with their host family and social integration. Their access to the target language afforded by the homestay families emerged as a crucial factor, so much as students' own agency and identity needs. Pragmatic markers (e.g., "like," "kind of," "and stuff," and "really") were chosen for their function as indexation of the social identity of the participants, i.e., to identify with the local teenage community. Spenader (2011, p. 382) presented the experiences of four American students in Sweden and suggested that "pre-collegiate exchange students are generally afforded increased opportunity to interact with native speakers of the target language because they reside in a

homestay environment and participate in a mainstream high school classroom.” Similarly, Hübner et al. (2021) hypothesized that language exposure should be higher when studying abroad during high school than during higher education but regretted that lack of studies comparing these two populations.

Tan and Kinginger (2013) examined how American high school students, closely supervised by the summer program organizers and their host families in China, reported on their experiences. They noticed that their relationships with their host families presented rich and numerous opportunities for cultural and linguistic development. The authors concluded by hypothesizing on the added value of SA for high school students but also asked for more investigation. In a later study, Kinginger (2015), investigated the experiences of two American high school students in China – one with limited language proficiency and the other with a more advanced proficiency. They were able to develop sociolinguistic skills such as teasing – a sign of familial intimacy – and food vocabulary and culture. Kinginger suggested that host parents may feel more responsible when receiving adolescents and integrate them more naturally within the family. At the same time, younger sojourners may be more willing to accept the identity of temporary child within a host family and therefore benefit from it to a greater extent. Moratinos-Johnston et al. (2021) came up with similar conclusions as they interviewed 11 Spanish undergraduate university students on their past experiences abroad in homestays or halls of residence as teenagers or young adults. These conclusions underline the possible advantages of an SA experience as a teenager linked to the homestay mainly. They also highlight important elements in adolescents’ SA experiences: families, peers, school, and the essential role of social network development.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Questions, Context, and Participants

This paper focuses on nine Swiss high school students’ social networks abroad and asks how Coleman’s model could be adapted to best represent adolescents’ experiences compared to university students. It takes a qualitative approach, as it is based on the narrative analysis of high school students’ diaries and interviews (Barkhuizen, 2013; Connelly & Clandinin, 2012; De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2015; Esin, 2011).

The nine participants took part in a bilingual Matura program offered by the Canton de Vaud. The Swiss education system proposes different professional

or school-based training options for teenagers. The high school Matura is the most demanding and selective degree for pupils who wish to pursue their studies after compulsory school. It grants access to all Swiss universities and technical schools. In Switzerland in 2021-2022, only about 19% of Swiss youth followed the Matura option. This option offers a general formation covering a wide range of subjects. Once they are engaged on this training path, and if their grades allow it, students can opt for a bilingual Matura in one of the national languages or in English. In the canton de Vaud, the bilingual Matura is offered mainly through a year-long immersive stay. Few students take this option (less than 3%) as it represents a highly challenging experience for adolescents.

The nine participants were all volunteers and free to withdraw from the project at any time. Their biographical and linguistic information is provided in Table (1).

TABLE (1)
PARTICIPANTS' INFORMATION

	Age prior departure	Prior SA experience	Language(s) spoken at home	Mother's L1	Father's L1
Manon	16 (2002)	2 weeks in Germany	French	French	French
Billie	16 (2003)	2 weeks in Malta	Cantonese, French	Cantonese	Cantonese
Chloe	16 (2003)	-	French	French	French
Rose	16 (2002)	4 weeks in London	Swiss-German, German, French	Swiss-German, German	Swiss-German, German
Audrey	16 (2002)	2 weeks in Germany	French	French	French
Melanie	16 (2002)	-	French	French	French
Albert	16 (2002)	-	Portuguese, French	Portuguese (Brazil)	Serbian
Lea	16 (2002)	-	French, Spanish, Italian	Spanish	Italian
Lily	16 (2002)	2 weeks in Germany	French	French	French

3.2. Data Collection and Narrative Inquiry

To collect the necessary data, the research project was built as a support program which aimed at accompanying the participants before, during and

after their SA experience. I met with them during two afternoons before their departure in August 2019 where key social, cultural, and linguistic challenges abroad were discussed. Once in England, participants wrote about their social, cultural, and linguistic experiences in an online diary either freely or prompted by different questions. Students were encouraged and reminded to write regularly but their final diaries varied in length ranging from 10 to 38 entries and from 2100 to 9000 words. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, students had to cut short their stay in March and the data collection ended with personal interviews in French (L1), three months after their return. The latter were an opportunity to discuss their diaries – a first reading and analysis of students’ diaries was shared and checked with them – their global experience, and the support program, and lasted from 45 to 90 minutes. The diaries and interviews were then (re)read several times and coded with NVivo 1.7.1. Each social group – co-nationals, international students, locals, host family, Swiss family, others? – were coded separately based on the kind of attachment, identification or rejection expressed (strong – neutral – weak). This first step allowed me to write the narrative of each student’s social experiences abroad (Ferry-Meystre, in press). Then, the experiences of the nine students – specifically their access to different social circles and their investment in the latter – were analyzed in terms of similarities and differences. These comparisons are the basis of the present article.

4. Findings and Discussion: High School Students’ Social Networks Abroad

The findings and discussion are structured around high school students’ different social circles. Co-nationals, international students, and locals – as defined by Coleman (2013, 2015) – are presented first. Host and home families – which will be added to the new model – follow.

4.1. Co-nationals

In his model of the three concentric circles, Coleman (2013, 2015) stated that while studying abroad, students first develop relationships with their co-nationals. This was also apparent for high school students. In fact, the feeling of belonging provided by their peers was essential for all of them; it worked as a base, a reference mark, a safe and stable place in the middle of a new, different, and unsettling environment (Brown & Richards, 2012; Coleman, 2013, 2015; Mas-Alcolea & Torres-Purroy, 2021; Ward et al., 2001). As they shared a common

language, similar educational backgrounds, and cultural references, and as they were all separated from their families and friends, they rapidly formed a small but solid community. To some extent, this safe base seemed fundamental for the students to thrive in their year abroad. In contrast, one participant – Chloé – did not develop strong links with her peers and she was not able to either enjoy her experience fully or truly invest in other types of social networks. She lacked the essential reassuring connections and strong identification with her peers which allowed the others to explore their new environment in a safer way. Most participants highlighted how easily and rapidly their new friendships formed with their peers – they described it as “love at first sight,” which was something they had never experienced before (Allen, 2010; Brown, 2009b).

J'ai rencontré les autres Suisses et je me suis direct bien entendu avec eux. Ça aide le fait qu'ils vivent la même chose que moi. [I've met the other Swiss people, and I've got on very well with them straight away. It helps that they're going through the same thing as me.] (Manon, diary, 2 Sept.)

On avait fait quelques activités ensemble entre Suisses au début, mais enfin, on s'entendait vachement bien. Et puis, ouais dès le début, on s'entendait bien. [We'd done a few activities together as Swiss people at the beginning, but we got on really well. And, yeah, we got on really well from the start.] (Rose, interview)

In fact, peers are essential and highly significant during adolescence (Crocetti et al., 2008; Erikson, 1968; Greischel et al., 2018). They accompany adolescents' quest for identity and allow strong identification(s) as they test different roles and positions. As the access to local peers was difficult, the connection with their Swiss peers was thus essential.

With that common base, participants nevertheless differed greatly in the way they approached their experience from within that group. For some students, like Billie and Manon, their group of peers was rich enough and they were unfortunately not highly motivated to develop other networks.

J'ai mes amis suisses et je pense qu'ils sont géniaux, on se comprend et comme nous sommes très différents les uns des autres, je trouve dans ce groupe tout ce dont j'ai besoin pour chaque situation. [I've got my Swiss friends, and I think they're great, we understand each other and as we're very different from each other, I find in this group everything I need for every situation.] (Billie, diary, 6 Feb.)

For others, like Audrey, Melanie and Rose, the group of peers was used to try and meet local students or others. These attempts were not always successful, but the group helped face failure or rejection and gave them strength to find new ways to enter different local communities.

Je fais maintenant du bénévolat dans un petit café local tous les dimanches avec une autre Suisse. [I now volunteer in a small local café every Sunday with another Swiss girl.] (Rose, diary, 11 March)

En allemand... on était 12 à avoir pris allemand en tout dans toute l'école et la moitié, on était suisse, du coup. Du coup on s'est assez... très vite lié d'amitié avec les autres Anglais qu'il y avait. On les voyait très souvent finalement, et du coup c'est comme ça que je les ai... pis aussi tous les Suisses on les a rencontrés parce qu'on passait vraiment beaucoup de temps tous ensemble. [In the German class... there were 12 of us who took German in the whole school and half of us were Swiss. So we made friends quite... quite quickly with the other English people there. We saw them quite often in the end, and that's how I got to know them... and we also met all the Swiss people because we really spent a lot of time together.] (Audrey, interview)

For Lea, Lily and Albert, the Swiss students acted as a stable and safe base which contributed to their self-confidence and well-being and allowed them to take greater risks on their own. These three participants managed to develop real relationships with some locals each in their own way but all through personal effort and motivation, as will be exposed below.

4.2. International Students

International students, as Coleman (2013, 2015) modeled, are second in line and quite easily reached. As a matter of fact, one participant, Lea, was lucky enough to be in a school with an important international student community. For Lea, this community acted as a second group of peers that offered many advantages. Just like her co-nationals, the other international students were experiencing the same need for social interactions and were thus organized in a friendly and welcoming community which she could enter right away. This broadened her possibilities of social interactions significantly, as well as her opportunities to improve her linguistic and intercultural skills (De Federico della Rua, 2008; Van Mol & Michielsen, 2015).

enfin y avait vraiment, d'ailleurs, un groupe, une fois par semaine, on se réunissait avec les internationaux. Donc, non c'était... pis je pense qu'on vivait tous la même chose, donc y avait... y avait pas de jugement. Et puis,

en même temps, il y avait aussi la garantie que on n'allait pas se faire exclure. [well, there really was a group, actually once a week, we got together with the internationals. So, no, it was... and I think we were all going through the same thing, so there was... there was no judgement. And then, at the same time, there was also the guarantee that we weren't going to be excluded.] (Lea, interview)

The other participants attended smaller schools and could unfortunately not benefit from the support of an organized international student community. Some nevertheless met international students, like Billie who, towards the end of her stay, rapidly developed a relationship with a Latvian girl, who was away from her country and eager to meet people. Audrey, for her part, became quite close to a boy in one of her classes who spoke French and Spanish. If he was not technically an international student as he was there with his family, he had experienced living in different countries and certainly understood her situation better. Audrey and her Swiss peers also became quite close to girls from her German class, who again, were more sensitive to the challenges of language learning (see Audrey's quote above).

4.3. Local Students

As mentioned above, meeting local students proved to be challenging for all participants and few reached the outer circle (Coleman, 2013, 2015). Upon arrival they were all eager to meet their local peers, but they also all noticed the locals' apparent coldness or indifference towards them (Brown, 2009a; Murphy-Lejeune, 2002; Pellegrino-Aveni, 2005; Ward et al., 2004), and they consequently chose to invest more or less time in their attempts to meet the locals (Norton, 2013).

Ce que j'ai le plus de difficultés avec, c'est de beaucoup communiquer avec les Anglais à l'école. Je trouve qu'ils ont une tendance un peu froide et distante, mais je pense que si je leur donne encore deux, trois semaines, ça devrait jouer! [What I have the most difficulty with is communicating a lot with the English at school. I find that they tend to be a bit cold and distant, but I think that if I give them another two or three weeks, it should help!] (Rose, diary, 17 Oct.)

En cours j'essaye toujours de parler avec les personnes à côté de moi mais c'est assez dur car ils ne font pas d'effort. [In class I always try to talk to the people next to me but it's quite hard because they don't make any effort.] (Manon, diary, 9 Oct.)

Par contre les gens ici sont vraiment unfriendly, ils sont méchants, ils s'amuse pas. [On the other hand, the people here are really unfriendly, they're mean, and they don't have any fun.] (Melanie, diary, 6 Oct.)

Many students regularly felt rejected and some preferred to disengage from those uncomfortable contexts. Peers are essential to adolescents' development, who also tend to be rather clannish and intolerant to differences as a way to fight a sense of identity loss (Erikson, 1968). If adolescents feel that they are being rejected by a group they wish to integrate, finding refuge within their own clique, and reinforcing it, becomes a sensible reaction. On the other hand, Melanie remained very active in her desire to integrate and be accepted by the local students, although she had to deal with open and unpleasant rejection from the locals repeatedly and suffered from it.

Un vendredi soir, nous sommes sortis avec mes amis suisses et le lundi tout le monde était au courant qu'on était dehors vendredi. Les gens faisaient des remarques sur notre sortie ou encore on avait discuté avec un garçon et on lui a dit 'vous faites pas réellement des soirées où on pourrait aller et se faire des amis' il nous a répondu 'ah non c'est juste que vous êtes pas invitées.' C'est d'une méchanceté et il me l'a redit hier par message. [One Friday night we went out with my Swiss friends and by Monday everyone knew we were out on Friday. People were making remarks about us going out or we'd been chatting to a guy, and we said, 'you don't really have parties where we can go and make friends' and he said, 'oh no, it's just that you're not invited'. That's really mean, and he said it to me again yesterday in a message.] (Melanie, diary: 30 Oct.)

In the end, only a few managed to overcome these barriers and to develop real relationships. Albert, for example, built two individual relationships with a boy and a girl sitting next to him in class. With time and personal motivation, he became close to them and after a few months, they were planning trips together, extending their friendship outside of school.

Je me suis fait deux amis Alex et Lauren avec qui je commençais à faire des plans pour des sorties que je ne pourrai malheureusement pas faire maintenant. Ils ont été très sympas et ils m'ont rendu la vie au collège plus agréable. [I made two friends Alex and Lauren with whom I started to make plans for outings that I unfortunately won't be able to do now. They were really nice and made my life at school a lot more enjoyable.] (Albert, diary: 10 April)

Lea and Lily are interesting examples of integration because both of them used one of their skills – drama for Lea and basketball for Lily – to be

integrated more rapidly (Campbell, 2011; Goldoni, 2013; Meier & Daniels, 2013; Whitworth, 2006). In their specific context, Lea and Lily rapidly gained legitimacy in a useful and recognized position and were consequently considered as worthy by the locals, who enjoyed their experience and competence in a particular field.

Et donc, c'était super de faire ça pis ça m'a permis d'apprendre à connaître quatre acteurs un peu plus en détails, on est devenus amis après. Et oui, ils sont vraiment super, on est encore en contact maintenant. [And so, it was great to do that, and it allowed me to get to know four actors in a bit more detail, and we became friends afterwards. And yes, they're really great, we're still in touch now.] (Lea, interview)

Apparemment je suis pas mal appréciée dans l'école et oui de tous les Suisses qui sont avec moi je suis celle qui suis là plus sociable, j'ai des contacts avec tout le monde et je parle pas mal avec des Anglais. Je suis « basketball Lily » dans l'école et ça me fait rire par ce que tous les jours y a un Helloo par ci, heya par là, et étant de nature très sociable et ayant besoin de relations pour avoir de l'énergie et de la bonne humeur; c'est tout ce qu'il me faut. [Apparently I'm quite well liked in the school and yes, of all the Swiss people who are with me, I'm the most sociable, I have contacts with everyone, and I speak quite a lot with English people. I'm 'Basketball Lily' in the school and that makes me laugh because every day there's a 'Helloo' here, a 'heya' there, and being very sociable by nature and needing relationships to have energy and a good mood, that's all I need.] (Lily, diary: 14 Feb.)

On the other hand, Lily's extreme visibility as the only girl in the basketball team also led to aggressive comments and behaviors from some locals, which Lily faced as well as she could, often finding refuge in her own values (Ferry-Meystre, 2025).

Du côté « jeunes » c'est aussi très dur de s'habituer à leur mentalité je suis désolée ça me coûte beaucoup de un, réaliser que bah oui on est différent et comme j'avais l'habitude d'être et d'agir qui convenait très bien en Suisse ne va pas ici et que les comportements, sourires, messages sur snap et tout le reste sont interprétés d'une manière différente qu'en Suisse. [As for the 'young', it's also very hard to get used to their mentality. I'm sorry, but it's cost me a lot to realize that, yes, we're different and that the way I used to be and act, which was fine in Switzerland, doesn't work here and that behavior, smiles, messages on snap and everything else are interpreted in a different way than in Switzerland.] (Lily, diary: 14 Feb.)

4.4. Host Families

The participants in the present study are high school students and not university students as in most existing SA studies, and those used by Coleman (2013, 2015) to design his model. They were all only 16 as they embarked on this challenging experience, and it is a significant parameter in the understanding of their experiences and the analysis of the development of their social networks. In fact, the significance and influence of high school students' families on identity development – which is rarely brought to the fore in studies focusing on university students – is considerable (Greischel et al., 2018; Taylor, 2013). Families are so central to adolescents' lives that in most SA programs designed for them, high school students stay with a host family, who can sometimes act as a substitute family (Shiri, 2015) and play an important role in their social and cultural integration. More precisely, host families can offer a privileged access to local communities since they are supposed to “take care” of the adolescent abroad.

Among the nine participants, some host families played a significant role in students' experiences, whereas others did not. The explanation for these differences often lay in the combination, or the dialogic relation, between students' investment in these relationships and the reception given by the family. Lily, Lea, Albert, Audrey, and Melanie were extremely happy with their host families, and they enjoyed many different moments with them. They felt grateful for the welcome they received by their host families and gave importance to their position within that new family. Concretely, they invested in these relationships and made the necessary efforts to help build the latter, even though their values were sometimes not in accordance with the family's. We can infer that family and family life were important for them as they were willing to endorse the position of a “daughter” or “son” in their host family (Kinging, 2015).

Ma famille d'accueil : Je vis avec Dave et Jane ils sont très gentils. Depuis que je suis arrivé ils ont toujours été adorables, après chaque dîner on reste à table on discute on joue ils me proposent de regarder des films avec eux ils sont super sympas. Il a déjà prévu de jouer au billard avec son fils et moi quand on sera les deux ici après les vacances de Noël. [My host family: I live with Dave and Jane, they're really nice. Since I arrived they've always been lovely, after every dinner we stay at the table and chat and play games and they suggest I watch films with them, they're

really nice. He's already planning to play pool with his son and me when we're both here after the Christmas holidays.] (Albert, diary: 8 Dec.)

Pour moi c'était... voilà ils m'ont pris sous leur aile, ils m'ont aidée à m'intégrer, ils m'ont fait découvrir une culture, ils étaient toujours très ouverts. C'étaient des gens, c'était vraiment des gens bien, par rapport à ça j'ai eu beaucoup de chance, donc ils m'apportaient... ouais un sentiment de sécurité, je me sentais à l'aise avec eux. [For me it was... they took me under their wing, they helped me to integrate, they introduced me to a new culture, they were always very open. They were really good people, and I was very lucky, so they gave me... yeah, a feeling of security, I felt at ease with them.] (Lea, interview)

Manon, Chloé, and Billie, on the other hand, chose to remain more distant from their host families. Manon and Chloé had a very friendly family as well, but something kept them at a certain distance throughout their stay.

Et dans ma famille d'accueil et ben la plupart du temps, je restais dans ma chambre, à part pour les repas et après les repas, j'aidais toujours à ranger du coup, on discutait un moment, mais sinon, je n'allais pas faire des activités avec eux ou quoi. [And in my host family, well, most of the time, I stayed in my room, except for meals and after meals, I always helped tidy up, so we talked for a while, but otherwise, I didn't go and do any activities with them or anything.] (Manon, Interview)

The situation was slightly different for Billie, who rightly felt unwelcome from time to time – as her host family was, for example, not present when she arrived from the airport – but who also rapidly decided that she did not need her host family except for food and shelter. As a matter of fact, Billie was so invested in her group of peers that she left everything else out.

Pis je sortais quand même très souvent donc j'avais moins de temps à passer avec eux, avec elles. Mais je passais tout mon temps dans la chambre souvent de toute façon. [And I went out a lot actually, so I had less time to spend with them. But I often spent all my time in the bedroom anyway.] (Billie, Interview)

Finally, Rose's situation was different as her host family was particularly unhelpful and hampering in her experience. Although she tried to invest as much as possible to improve her situation, the living conditions supplied by her host family remained problematic and they did impact her experience significantly.

C'est un peu compliqué, mais je m'entendais pas très bien avec la mère d'accueil, enfin avec la famille en général, parce que c'était la responsable [...] des Suisses dans cette ville-là. [...] Et puis, elle avait mis en place certaines règles qui étaient un peu trop extrêmes, à notre avis. [...] Enfin, parce qu'on était dans une ville assez petite, où on pouvait pas faire grand chose le soir. Et du coup, elle nous laissait pas vraiment sortir. Mais vu qu'on habitait tout loin de... de l'autre ben c'était un peu compliqué pour passer du temps ensemble et du coup, ben elle était assez stricte. [It's a bit complicated, but I didn't get on very well with the host mother, well with the family in general, because she was in charge [...] of the Swiss in that town. [...] And she had put in place some rules that were a bit too extreme, in our opinion. [...] I mean, because we were in a fairly small town, where you couldn't do much in the evening. So she didn't really let us go out. But as we lived a long way from... from each other, it was a bit complicated to spend time together and so she was quite strict.] (Rose, Interview)

She even tried to find a different host family, but no other was available in her area. In this type of situation, age can become a barrier because adolescents are left under the supervision of a family, with its rules and values. Although students can resist and choose to refuse any position within the family, they are still legally minor and will possibly have to cope with such a situation in spite of everything. Thus, the importance of the host family is undeniable in the sense that it can affect the experience positively but also negatively (Schmidt-Rinehart & Knight, 2004; Tanaka, 2007). On the other hand, students' investment in the family is evidently crucial to the development of positive relationships or any type of relationships.

Integration and investment within the host families cannot easily be inserted within Coleman's model because it seems to take a parallel path, often disconnected from SA students' other social networks usually made of peers – people of similar age, occupations and interests. The three concentric circles model represents the social networks developed by university students in their university life and host families are usually not part of their experiences. As a matter of fact, host families can be considered as part of the outer circle but contrary to Coleman's model, this outer circle can often be rapidly or easily accessed.

4.5. Families at Home

The significance and influence of high school students' families often proved to be considerable. This is not surprising since their stay in England was

their first long experience outside their family circle, away from their parents' daily support and guidance. As many theorized, parents – along with peers – are an essential factor in adolescents' identity development (Greischel et al., 2018; Taylor, 2013). In fact, Greischel et al. (2018) concluded that parents seem to influence adolescents' development while abroad even more than friends, possibly because they represent more reliable and stable relationships in a time of change. For the nine participants, the separation from their family was experienced both positively and negatively, with different consequences. For example, it was particularly difficult for Manon and for Chloé, to the point that it sometimes prevented them from enjoying their experience.

Ma maman et mes deux sœurs sont venues me voir. Je suis très proche de ma famille et ce petit voyage nous a encore plus soudé, j'ai profité un max de les voir. Au moment des séparations, pour la première fois, c'est moi qui les amenais à l'aéroport et pas l'inverse, c'était vraiment dure pour moi, j'ai beaucoup pleuré. En plus, après j'ai dû prendre le bus pendant une heure pour rentrer chez moi, C'était super long et j'ai pleuré presque tout le trajet. Chaque fois que je quitte ma famille, c'est encore plus dur que la précédente. La semaine d'après était moyen, j'avais pas beaucoup de moral et de la peine à rester positive. Le fait que ma famille soit venue, ça a tout chamboulé mon environnement. C'est comme si avant, j'avais deux monde séparés et que maintenant ils sont tout mélangés. [My mum and my two sisters came to see me. I'm very close to my family and this little trip brought us even closer together, so I made the most of seeing them. When it came to the separations, for the first time it was me who took them to the airport and not the other way round, which was really hard for me and I cried a lot. What's more, afterwards I had to take the bus home for an hour, which was really long and I cried most of the way. Every time I leave my family it's even harder than the last. The week after was average, I wasn't in very good spirits and it was hard to stay positive. The fact that my family came over turned my environment upside down. It's as if before I had two separate worlds and now they're all mixed up together.] (Manon, diary, 14 March)

These individual experiences tend to show that a certain degree of independence is required to be able to enjoy the stay. For all participants, their Swiss families acted as a strong support in the background; they talked on the phone on a regular basis, whether it was every day, twice a week or twice a month and kept in touch via messages even more regularly. On the other hand, their parents' physical absence was also highly beneficial on different levels: Audrey and Billie were relieved to be away from sometimes conflictual

situations and Lea felt liberated from her parents' influence and able to thrive and grow.

Mais en même temps, ça a été particulièrement agréable de revenir en Angleterre. Étant donné que les relations dans ma famille ne sont pas toujours très simples à gérer, prendre de la distance me permet de souffler un peu à ce niveau là. [But at the same time, it's been particularly nice to come back to England. Given that the relationships in my family are not always easy to manage, taking a step back gives me a bit of a breather.] (Audrey, diary, 3 Feb.)

Mon année à l'étranger se passe très bien. Je réalise qu'elle m'a permis de me découvrir, d'en apprendre plus sur moi-même. Au début, ça faisait un peu peur de réaliser tout ça et je pense que je refusais de voir la réalité. En étant loin de ma vie en Suisse, de mes proches et de leurs préconçus, je me suis libérée. [My year abroad is going very well. I realize that it allowed me to discover myself and learn more about myself. At first, it was a bit scary to realize all this and I think I was refusing to face reality. Being away from my life in Switzerland, from my family and friends and their preconceptions, freed me up.] (Lea, diary, 5 March)

Finally, all students gained in independence and maturity during their stay, as they all had to deal with difficult situations – or simply live – on their own (Greischel et al., 2018; Mitchell et al., 2017). They all proudly noted and underlined that their stay abroad helped them grow up. Again, a high school student's experience abroad cannot be equated to a university student's as they have not, on average, reached the same level of autonomy before their departure. Thus, whatever model is used to read adolescents' social experiences abroad, the importance of families and host families, need to be integrated.

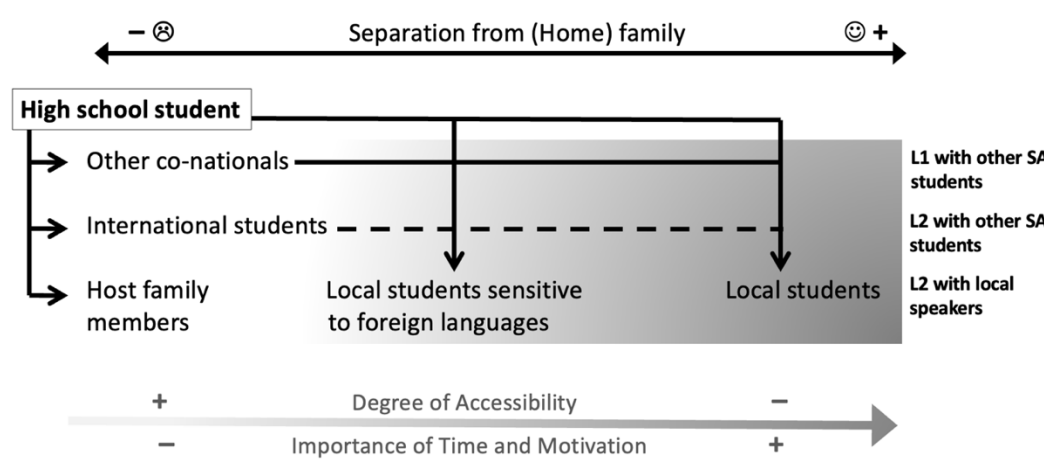
5. A New Model

In order to integrate these different elements, a new model is proposed, which represents the development of social networks for high school students in relation to linguistic familiarity and accessibility (Figure 2). With the idea of the degree of accessibility, the general dynamic of formation developed by Coleman is kept. The inner, middle, and outer circles are represented respectively in the first, second, and third lines. Groups that are easily accessible are depicted on the left, while those less accessible are situated on the right. The various arrows signify potential trajectories to connect with different groups, either through individual student initiatives or with the support of co-nationals. The dotted line which starts from international students expresses a possibility

to meet the locals with an international group. Nevertheless, this option was not observed in the present study, as international student communities are rare in high schools and when present, they tended to be self-sufficient. The line at the top represents the variability of the experience of separation from their families (between students' experiences but within one student's experience as well). When the separation is experienced positively, adolescents are more likely to reach the less accessible groups. On the other hand, when separation is difficult, adolescents tend to have less strength and motivation to reach the less accessible groups. One may rightfully wonder if the relation is not reversed, i.e., if the difficulties of reaching the locals, to take only one example, do not also influence the experience of separation and make high school students more homesick. It seems appropriate to consider the existence of a dialogic relation between these elements.

FIGURE (2)

DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL NETWORKS FOR ADOLESCENTS ABROAD



If we take Manon as a first example, we can say that she reached her co-nationals rapidly. Surrounded by their presence, she tried to meet local students because she was aware of the benefits of being integrated, but this was not very successful both because the locals were not easily accessible and because she rapidly lost motivation. Her lack of motivation can also be linked to her homesickness as she missed her family so much that she needed comfortable relationships – sharing a similar culture and language – to replace them. The same can be said about her host family which she invested only minimally. Lea, on the other hand, presents a very different path as she formed strong relationships with her co-nationals, international students and her host family quite rapidly. She even managed to reach some locals on her own as she

invested in a drama project. It took some time for her to establish these relationships but her legitimacy as a play director lessened the difficulties to access them. Moreover, she felt empowered being away from some of her family's beliefs, which helped her grow and assert herself in her different social circles.

6. Conclusion: How to Support High School Students?

This new model offers a comprehensive representation of high school students' social networks abroad. It can inform teacher education programs, that is preparing teachers, school leaders, and administrators in successfully running such programs for adolescents, which are likely to become more and more common. With a better knowledge of adolescents' experiences abroad, the program organizers could implement – and justify if needs be – different elements both in the home and host countries to favor and increase the development of students' social networks. For instance, this new model could be a base to discuss the multiple possibility of social networks abroad with the students themselves and give them strategies to develop rich and meaningful social interactions. Thus, key elements should be shared with them before and/or during their stay: (1) the importance of co-nationals and other international students, (2) the difficulty of reaching the locals and the selection of possibly more accessible locals, and (3) the importance of host families along with the possible difficulty of the separation from home.

First, students must be aware that the presence of co-nationals is highly beneficial and that it does not, in itself, prevent the development of other social networks (Mitchell et al., 2017). As Coleman (2013) underlined, the popular belief which says that SA students should be on their own, away from their co-nationals if they want to optimize their stay abroad is wrong and can cause frustration and low self-esteem. The message should be more nuanced with a warning about the risks of creating an exclusive L1 community – and the importance of agency – but also a word about the benefits of co-nationals. As underlined earlier, international students present an important resource SA students can easily invest in, and they should be encouraged to do so provided other international students are present in their high school. If not, high school students should be aware that their language learning experiences can be used to initiate relationships with locals who are

also learning languages for example. As for the local students, adolescents should not be in a rush and should take (and give) time as they attempt to integrate local groups. Although they may get discouraged, they should be aware that the process normally takes time and consequently, not take it personally. As far as family is concerned, high school students should really be encouraged to invest at least minimally in their relationships with their host family because they represent a unique opportunity to access the local language and culture. Just like for all relationships, investing in them does not necessarily mean that the response will be positive and that they will develop into something meaningful. But on the other hand, not investing in them will systematically lead to a poor, useless, and meaningless relationship. Finally, high school students should only embark on such an adventure if they feel ready. Their motivation should really be personal and not driven by others or social discourses. High school students are young, and they will probably have plenty of other opportunities to study abroad. If leaving their home and their family does not feel right, they should not go as they will not be able to benefit from their SA experience.

The support program designed for this study encompassed some of the elements described above. During the introduction meetings, the question of the accessibility of the locals was raised, as well as the “risks” of staying with their co-nationals only. Globally, students learnt from our discussions and each of them left with tools and answers that they did not forget, although the present study did not measure its effectiveness. Another key element of the introduction meetings was the presence of returning students, which was unanimously appreciated: it provided students with concrete experiences on the same issues as well as first-hand tips. The use of an online platform to support students during their time abroad was found to be highly practical and is strongly recommended. Writing about their experiences helped students gain perspective on challenging situations, with many students appreciating the researcher’s presence and feedback. With the help of the new model proposed here, targeted tasks could be integrated into the support program via a digital platform, such as a mobile app. For example, tasks could encourage communication with host families (e.g., projects on their occupations, habits, expressions, etc.) or foster students’ engagement with local communities (e.g., joining sports or arts club, offering assistance to local organizations, supporting French students/teachers, etc.). A turnkey solution for all does not exist, as each SA program needs to think of their specific

context and resources, but the new model provided here can surely help design and structure varied and appropriate interventions.

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