

**An exploration of
integration journeys,
identity and well-being with
Syrian refugee youth**

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We thank our participants for taking time out of their busy schedules to share their experiences of integration in Canada. In the spirit of appreciation for our participants' contributions, we create a website to display the photos they took and the meanings they attached to them. You can access the participants' photos by following this link:

<https://syrianyouthproject.ca/>

Introduction

This research project draws upon principles and processes of youth participatory action research (YPAR) to bring Syrian newcomer youth together to examine experiences of integration.

Narrative and arts-based methods, such as photo-voice, were used to explore what it is like to move to a new country and re-make home (Israel et al., 2001). In particular, this research project was interested in exploring how integration is experienced and navigated in relation to family, peers/friendships, school, work and community.

With a focus on newcomer youth of Syrian background, this project engaged male and female newcomer youth, youth in school and youth who are working, in order to examine diverse experiences.

This research project explored how integration is experienced and navigated in relation to family, peers/friendships, school, work and community.

Research Questions

Key overarching research questions guided by the perspectives of youth are:

- What protective factors and contexts of vulnerability shape the social integration experiences of Syrian refugee youth?
- And, how can supportive environments (community, school and home) be enhanced to strengthen protective factors and support refugee youth in experiencing increased resilience?

This overarching research questions was explored through the examination of sub-questions that guided youth research participants in mapping out and storying their experiences since arriving in London. Through more focused sub-questions, which were identified in collaboration with co-researchers, we invited participants to discuss experiences in relation to schooling, peer relationships and family relationships, as well as exploring stressful and challenging experiences encounters, specific moment or events, successes, strategies of coping, and informal and formal supports in their lives.

Methodology and Methods

This study is one in a series of projects looking to understand integration experiences of Syrian refugees. This particular project focused on youth experiences. Using narrative methods created an opportunity for youth to share their stories in safe and dynamic ways (Wang & Burris, 1994). Overall, the goal is to continue to refine services in Canada to support optimal integration experiences.

The study design was a collaborative, community-based research process. The first step was to work with MRCSSI to recruit 7 Syrian refugee youth (age 15-22) from the London area as co-researchers. These youth met for 5 weeks for 10 hours in total. These meetings allowed the researchers to support the youth co-researchers in learning about qualitative research. Particularly, the group focused on learning about Participatory Action Research and the photovoice method. Syrian youth co-researchers were invited to explore

concepts of integration, resilience, migration and methods related to narrative development. These youth co-researchers then worked with the lead researcher and the Public Education & Community Programs Manager at MRCSSI to host 4 focus groups with 5 to 6 participants in each group, all Syrian youth aged 15-22, to share their stories of integration and resilience. The four focus groups were conducted in Arabic and English, based on the co-researchers and our youth participants' preferences. These focus groups have provided an opportunity to introduce the youth to narrative methods in a hands-on way. From these groups, 9 youth, including those in a co-researcher role, were invited to engage in a photovoice process to construct their stories of integration and resilience. All participants engaged in a total of 4 focus groups where they explained the meaning of their photos. Lastly, 9 additional youth participants were recruited for in-depth interviews with a particular focus on Syrian refugee youth who are less connected to services and group activities. The goal here was to ensure breadth of participation beyond those who would be open to group research participation. Photovoice interviews, traditional focus groups, and in-depth interviews were all audio-recorded for analysis. Ethical approval has been obtained by Western University, Research Ethics Board (REB).

Analysis

In this project, data have been collected through multiple methods as mentioned above. Photovoice data include photos and verbal explanations for the photos as well as data from focus groups and one-on-one interviews all have been incorporated in the analysis. Thematic analysis has been applied to guide this analysis where commonalities and differences in the data are captured (Braun & Clark, 2006). This analysis involved an inductive approach where the data speak to itself and themes are proposed based on participants' contributions and stories. The initial coding process took place while data collection was still ongoing to classify codes in clusters and check for new ones. Different aspects of youth experiences of moving to a new country revolve around ways that allow the youth to achieve a level of integration with their community and some strategies that have helped them to surmount challenges. Based on that, preliminary themes were created. Participants' photos, meanings they associated with the photos, and quotes from the focus groups and one-on-one interviews have been integrated into the findings section to ensure the rigour of the findings (Morse, 2015).

Preliminary Findings

Congruent with a participatory, photovoice method, participants had shared ownership over how their stories were constructed and interpreted (Wang & Burris, 1994). In this project, the photos that the youth took represent their path of reaching milestones in Canada. For youth who have been in Canada for 5 to 6 years, their path has taken them to a place where they have completed several goals related to school and language proficiency, but they are aware that the journey of integration continues. For newcomer youth who have been in Canada for 2 to 3 years, their photos portray them walking in their first path with unique challenges.

Overall, youth conceive of moving to Canada as a never-ending path. Especially in older male youths' experiences with increased responsibilities, they have mentioned that if they had arrived in Canada at a younger age, they would have had better outcomes. For example, the participants shared stories of graduating from high school at age 21 and carrying responsibilities toward their family has held them back from achieving what they have desired in terms of education and work. When their family is not well integrated in the host country, they feel pressured to finish high school earlier by taking less demanding classes, which do not qualify them to be enrolled in university education in spite of their personal interests. Another way to fulfil family needs is to simply quit studying in order to enter the workforce and support their family. In the next section, some photos that our participants took are presented with ascribed meanings. Then, the experience of integration and resilience for Syrian youth is reported in detail and the challenges that youth encounter to achieve integration are explored.

Participants' photographs



Figure 1

“My experience was like a door that has been opened for me. I had hoped to study, succeed in my life. The door symbolizes paths or ways for the things that I like to do in life. [the interviewer and participants commented on the side the door opens]. It is that I stand in front of the world. The whole world is forward. Look, there are trees, and it is green outside. There are things that give me the hope to keep going. I took this photo I was 16 years old” (Raghad, 22 years old)



Figure 2

“My second picture is a path that I walk step by step. It has no end because there is no end to things. Once I finish one thing, I start doing the other thing. There is always something in front. In this picture, there is this line, it is like a stumble or any other thing along the way that may shock you or stop you, but no, you will go back to your plan that you had for yourself. You may learn from it, and there is this small plant in between the tiles. While you are going through your journey, there are beautiful things. It makes you feel the joy of the experience during the tough times.” (Raghad, 22 years old)



Figure 3

“In this picture, you can see the sun is far away, and the road is in front of the photo. From my experience, I want to arrive at some destinations, but it was far away from me. I kept going until I arrived, and I was still away from the sun. we were going to the beach when I took this picture... So, this photo represents my way and the difficulties that I have experienced till I arrive at where I want which is clear here in the second photo.” (Yusra, 21 years old)



Figure 4

“Then when you arrive, you are happy with things and start feeling comfortable in the community. If you see here in the first photo [figure 3], it is empty, right? but in this photo, there are clouds, trees, and birds. There is life. In the first picture [figure 3], it is just a road, empty and boring, but at the end of it is a great thing, the sun.” (Yusra, 21 years old)

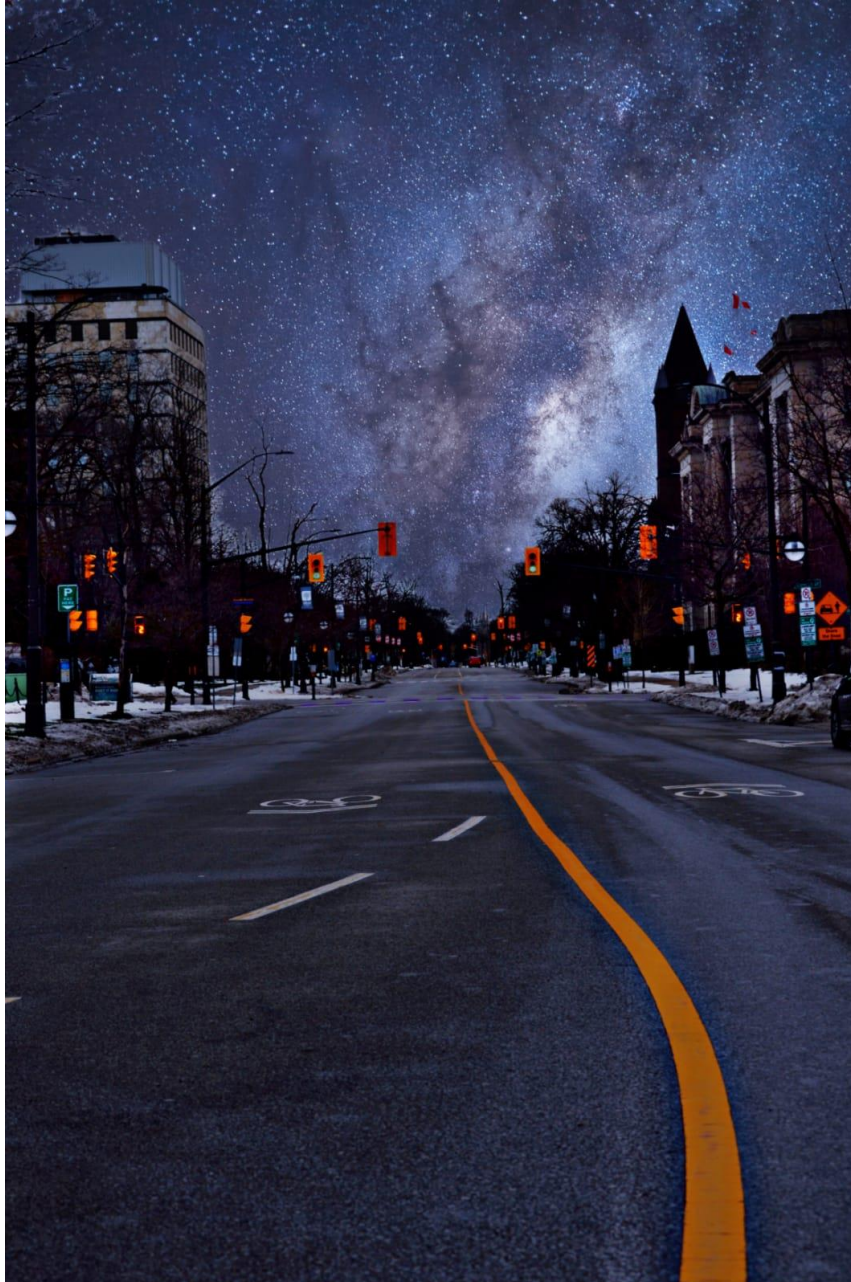


Figure 5

“This picture depicts the hope I have. I took this one when I first came here [Canada] in downtown. The road and the traffic lights mean a lot to me. There is an end to this road ... but when I go home and look at this picture, I see the road and see the hope too. the traffic lights are obstacles, and it is going to turn red, but that does not mean you are going to stop all your life. Yes, it is an obstacle, but you are going to continue your life. There is no straight road without bumps. It is a long way, but I will arrive.” (Adel, 19 years old)

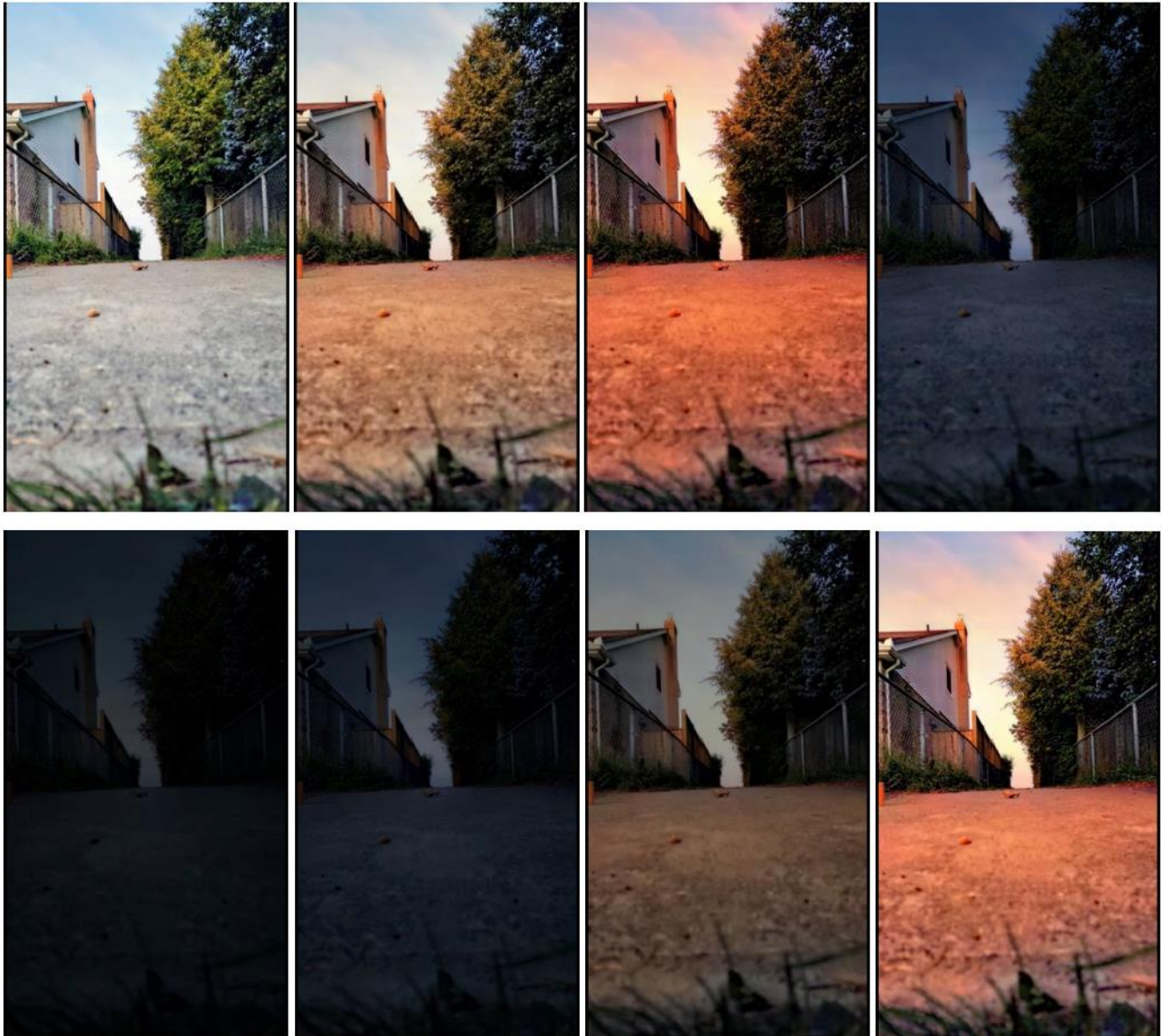


Figure 6

“The idea behind this video is to take the scene from the morning to the night. When I was coming back from school; I have noticed a narrow path. There were a lot of trees, the house! A lot of leaves falling. The scene was beautiful. I do not know what made me stop and take a video. It feels like it is a path to forget whatever sad and bad situations I went through. The falling leaves felt like saying let’s forget what happened and keep walking in this path. The leaves resemble us, and the nice breeze, Ahh. It felt saying nothing worth feeling this much pain. I felt it saying: let’s be as light as these flying leaves. This path for

me seemed like if it was a time machine that makes you forget the past, the sad memories.” (Rahaf, 17 years old)

Integration

The meaning of integration itself was contentious among participants throughout our work together. They highlighted 4 modes of integration: co-existence, a gradual process, integration on a communication level, or no integration at all. Achieving co-existence means having the ability to find a middle ground between the Arabic culture and the Canadian culture where youth can safely embrace Canadian values and principles to establish a healthy and productive life while maintaining their first home cultural ties and the Syrian-Arabic identity. It was more common to observe this mode of integration among male participants whereas female participants shared more consistent stories of struggle.

The second mode of integration shared from participants is that of a gradual process. This was noted to have a chronological element in that youth had to first achieve a certain level of proficiency in the English language where they can communicate with Canadians and English-speaking friends. Being enrolled in an ESL program upon their arrival has helped them to acquire the language in a timely manner; however, transitioning from ESL classes to being engaged in regular classes with Canadian students has been identified as the first precarious step of integration. The feeling of being at the same level as the Canadian students and receiving the same education as their Canadian counterpart creates a sense of equality which, as a result, helps in making them feeling part of the school community. Graduating from high school sets them on an expedited pathway of integration. Likewise, starting college, achieving high grades, and getting a job have been linked to facilitating a high level of integration.

The third mode of integration shared by participants is integration based on communication. The ability to speak and comprehend the language subsequently allows youth to be engaged in conversations with others. On the one hand, having conversations with Canadian or English-speaking friends promotes harmony between them. On the other hand, exchanging thoughts and ideas with other students or strangers on the street

leads some youth to realize how others perceive them as Muslims and people of Arabic descent. After being able to speak the language and becoming partially integrated into the school system, workplace, or community, youth found themselves more explicitly conscious of prejudice, racism, othering, and stereotyping. This realization leads youth to believe that they will never be fully integrated in Canada. Full integration in this group is defined as complete acceptance of one's origin and identity in the receiving country.

An endless pathway to unachievable integration was a common perception among female youth participants. They expressed their disappointment regarding not being able to fully integrate into their workplace or school. They talked about being labelled and targeted immediately as they are recognized by their appearance that they belong to a certain racial and religious group. Wearing Hijab (headscarf) identifies them as Muslims and no degree of language acquisition alters this visible differentiation. In this regard, young females were more frequent victims of discrimination and harassment. Undergoing frequent discriminative incidents such as being yelled at in public places to take the headcover off, or being mocked for how they looked wearing Hijab, caused them to conclude that their integration journey has been limited to a narrow and superficial interactions with the people around them either in school, workplace, or community. Superficial integration implies that the integration dynamic remains restricted to satisfying rote social necessity instead of authentically creating a safe space to connect human-to-human. Superficial integration based on necessity can be explained by being in the same school with others, so there is a need to communicate and cooperate to reach mutual goals. The same applies to the workplace, employed youth and customers need to maintain a basic level of communication to provide or receive services. However, that is as far as integration goes where deep discrimination persists.

The final mode of integration identified by youth is where integration simply isn't the goal. In this case, participants expressed no interest in or necessity for integration outside their cultural group. They explain that as long as they can deal with the system and the people around them, they are sufficient and satisfied with this level of integration. However, several youths link their decision of not aiming to achieve a higher level of integration or show no interest in integrating with other people outside their small, racialized group to experiencing incidents of labelling, judgement, discrimination, and

being attacked for who they are and how they look or what they believe in. Therefore, they respond to such incidents by detaching and distancing themselves to cope with their existence in a place that rejects them as they are. It was impossible to differentiate whether non-integration was an ultimate goal or a coping mechanism.

Resilience

Unlike the experience of integration, the concept of resilience is straightforward for youth in this study. Syrian youth participants recognized several factors that help them thrive in their new home. Supportive family, encouraging teachers, helpful friends, understanding mentors, and available tangible resources create a sense of empowerment for youth in both school and workplaces. Another factor that was brought up in almost every interview was the interpersonal skills that they possess to overcome any hardships. Having passion and setting practical goals gave youth the ability to deal with difficult situations and conquer adversity. Moreover, family and cultural expectations as well as personal expectations that youth hold for themselves have played a pivotal role in shaping their experiences of integration and resilience. Because they align themselves with what is expected from them by their family and their cultural values, they feel that they have guidance within themselves to make their goals clear and attainable. For example, firstborn youth have certain responsibilities that younger siblings do not usually undertake. These responsibilities such as contributing to the household budget, babysitting, following up with younger siblings on school work, making medical appointments for family members, helping parents to figure out how to pay bills and rent, providing translation and interpretation help to their parents, and carrying out home chores encourage them to be persistent and diligent in different aspects of life. They observe the personal growth that they gain by handling a variety of tasks at the same time. Time management, multitasking, leadership, critical thinking, general knowledge acquisition, prioritizing and communication skills are some abilities that youth refined from being in the oldest sibling position in the family. This was demonstrated in Reham's conversation, when she says, "I know how to rent a place now". Similarly, Khaled sheds light on how the father-son role has been reversed when he was talking about the time of learning car driving. He learnt to drive on his own then became the driving instructor for

his father. Khaled was smiling while expressing, “I taught my dad how to drive, instead of him teaching me how to drive”.

Younger siblings acknowledge their parents’ decision to move to Canada and feel that they have been given an opportunity that their friends back home could not have. They perceive their parents’ coming to Canada and leaving extended family behind as a sacrifice that they are enormously grateful for this. Syrian youth acknowledged that their parents emigrated to Canada for the sake of offering a bright future for them. Therefore, they wanted to achieve the highest marks in school as a way to say thank you to their parents. For all participants, older or younger, meeting family, cultural, and personal expectations was perceived as the righteousness that gives them a sense of their worth and motivates them to accomplish more.

Several female participants recognized the tension between them and their Canadian classmates and used experiences of racism to motivate themselves to perform better in school to prove their abilities. They explain that their Canadian classmates think that newcomers’ youth do not understand things or they are not as smart as they should be. This motivated youth in our study to prove these classmates wrong. However, youth in this group emphasize the significance of acquiring the English language as quickly as possible to show how smart and sophisticated they can be. They point out that the impression their Canadian classmates have about the newcomers’ youth abilities as weak is false, and it is a matter of time to learn the language to be able to convey their ideas and express themselves clearly.

Throughout our time with the youth co-researchers and participants, a great emphasis was put on the fatal hate attack on the Muslim family in London during the summer 2021. This incident disturbed youths’ feelings of security and belonging and destroyed the sense of home that they have been building during their recent past in Canada. However, it has also made them persevere in practicing their freedom of religion. While some female youth locked themselves up for a longer period of time and other would leave their houses less frequently than before as a response to the emotional distress and the fear that this incident has left them with, the incident triggered other youth to express their Muslim identity to a greater extent. Several youths talk about the need to defend

themselves and prove their existence by showing their identity as Muslim females. Ahlam who is 21 years old confirmed that despite feeling insecure walking on the street, she intentionally goes outside more than usual to maintain a form of normality in her daily life as well as show the public that Muslim women are thriving, she said, “I leave home more often to show them that I am here”. Nuha, a 15 year old girl, had the same opinion as Ahlam. Nuha robustly stresses the significance of protecting one’s identity in the face of hateful crimes, she adds “I wanna wear a skirt often with Hijab on to show how Muslim I am”.

Conclusion

Through photography as a platform of discussion, youth co-researchers and participants were able to uncover the complex nature of integration for Syrian newcomers to Canada. Youth lived this dynamic tension of both hurrying up to integrate while integration was an endless process. There was also a sense of a false promise of integration, particularly for young women wearing hijab, where visibility, racism, and discrimination meant the road to integration might never end. Regardless of language acquisition, employment, and development of social networks, Syrian youth could be ‘othered’ at any moment through any comments from friends or strangers. There is a precarity in this, a sense that one’s dreams and goals are held too much in the hands of others. For some, this led to questions of defeat. Perhaps integration isn’t really the goal, perhaps having a cultural community where one can belong and be safe from violence is enough. However, integration wasn’t just a personal journey, it involved social pressure from friends and classmates, as well as pressure from family to find employment, schooling, and belonging among English-speaking Canadians.

Overall, we as the research team were inspired by our youth co-researchers and participants. They showed laudable resilience in navigating complex and often competing pressures and responsibilities. While we did not do comparative research, the youth did express a unique degree of pressure that some felt was more than their parents faced. The peer pressure of high school or post-secondary years becomes that much more accentuated when combined with pressures related to integration and settlement.

To conclude, we leave recommendations from this work fairly open to the reader or to future youth participants and researchers. Our work primarily focused on creating a safe context, using unique methods and relationship-building, for youth to tell honest stories of their struggles and their strengths. Youth did not reflect on policies for change or social systems requiring reform, but shared more generally about their lived experiences. We note that supports for English language acquisition, employment, and anti-racism would all be relevant to stories participants shared. Future work should consider best modes of these supports for Muslim newcomer youth.

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