

An Exploration of Integration Journeys, Identity and Well-being with Syrian Refugee Youth

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WHAT THE RESEARCH IS ABOUT

OVERVIEW: Syrian refugee youth (aged 15 to 22) used narrative and arts-based methods such as PhotoVoice to share their integration experiences. The project explored how integration is experienced and navigated in relation to family, peers/friendships, school, work and community.

OBJECTIVE: To understand Syrian refugee youth's perspectives on integration and to explore the protective factors and vulnerabilities that shape their integration experiences and resilience.

RESEARCH JUSTIFICATION: This study broadens our understanding of the diverse experiences of integration among Syrian refugee youth, as well as identifying protective factors and supports that can enhance refugee youth's resilience. YPAR is a resilience-building process that helps youth co-researchers build important skills.

HOW THE DATA WAS OBTAINED

The study used a youth participatory action research (YPAR) framework. Seven Syrian refugee youth (aged 15-22) were recruited as co-researchers. Co-researchers worked alongside the lead researcher and MRCSSI staff to facilitate four focus groups, with 5-6 Syrian youth (aged 15-22) in each group. Focus groups were conducted in Arabic or English based on co-researchers' and participants' preferences. From among the focus group participants, nine youth, including some co-researchers, were invited to engage in a photovoice process to construct their stories of integration and resilience. Concurrently, nine other youth participated in in-depth interviews, with a goal of capturing the perspectives of refugee youth who are less connected to MRCSSI's services and group activities. Participants' photos, the meanings they associated with the photos, and data from the focus groups and interviews were incorporated and thematically analysed.

WHAT THE STUDY FOUND

Integration

- Overall, youth conceive of integration in Canada as a never-ending path. Youth described different modes of integration and talked about finding a middle ground between maintaining Arabic culture and embracing Canadian culture. Older male youth often felt that they would have had better outcomes if they had arrived in Canada at a younger age. Arriving at an older age was associated with increased family responsibilities that held them back from achieving what they desired in terms of education and work. This pressure was intensified when their families were not well integrated.
- Many female youth participants felt unable to fully integrate into their school or workplace because their appearance clearly identified them as belonging to a certain racial or religious group. These young women shared stories of discrimination and harassment, often because they wear the Hijab.

Language learning was seen as an essential step in integration.

- Participants identified transitioning from ESL classes to regular classes as the first precarious step of integration. Feeling like they were receiving the same level of education as their Canadian counterparts created a sense of equality and helped participants feel like part of the school community.
- The ability to have conversations with English-speaking friends promoted harmony between them. However, being able to speak the language made youth more conscious of prejudice, racism, othering, and stereotyping, and made some youth feel that they will never be fully integrated in Canada.
- Youth felt that graduating from high school sets them on an expedited pathway of integration. Starting college, achieving high grades, and getting a job were all identified as facilitating a high level of integration.
- Some participants expressed a lack of interest in integration outside of their cultural group. However, several youth linked this lack of interest to incidents of judgement and discrimination, to which they responded by detaching and distancing themselves.

Resilience

Youth participants identified several factors that helped them thrive:

- Supportive family, encouraging teachers, helpful friends, understanding mentors, and the availability of resources created a sense of empowerment for youth in both school and workplaces.
- Interpersonal skills – such as having passion and setting practical goals.
- For all participants – older or younger – meeting family, cultural, and personal expectations gave them a sense of worth and motivated them to accomplish more.
- Several female participants recognized the tension between themselves and their Canadian classmates and used experiences of racism as motivation to perform better and prove their abilities.

London Summer 2021 Hate Attack

During this project, great emphasis was put on the fatal hate attack on the Muslim family during the summer of 2021 in London, Ontario, where this study took place. The incident disturbed youths' feelings of security and belonging and destroyed the sense of home that they had been building in Canada. Many young women described leaving their houses less frequently as a response to the emotional distress and fear the incident had left them with. On the other hand, some young women talked about the need to defend themselves and prove their existence by showing their identity as Muslim women.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Current policies around bullying may disguise the particularities of hate. Anti-bullying initiatives should explicitly name racism and Islamophobia and must centre BIPOC students.
- Complex gendered norms create challenges for Muslim girls and young women within the broader Canadian community and their own cultural community. Funding is needed to support initiatives that create spaces for Muslim girls to empower themselves.
- Recommendations from the National Summit on Islamophobia and the National Council of Canadian Muslims should be implemented. The recommendation to 'fund Muslim storytelling,' was addressed by this study.

[View Project Webpage](#)

ABOUT CYRRC

The Child and Youth Refugee Research Coalition (CYRRC) is a network of researchers, service providers, and government partners working together to produce and share research that facilitates the integration of young refugees and their families in Canada and beyond.

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official position of the Child and Youth Refugee Research Coalition.

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