



Hamilton Immigration
Partnership Council



What “Belonging” Means to Newcomer Youth in Hamilton

— SEPTEMBER 2024 —



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Based on recommendations for future research identified in HIPC's 2023 Immigrant Survey and 2024 Community Planning Forum Report, the goal of this project was to investigate what a "sense of belonging" means for newcomer youth in Hamilton, how much they feel they belong in Hamilton, and how they believe sense of belonging among newcomer youth could be improved. Findings in this report will inform HIPC's future work and community planning.

This is an important area of inquiry to evaluate which of HIPC's activities are making the most impact to help newcomer youth feel like they belong, to inform priorities for community planning and advocacy, and to understand how HIPC collective action can be improved based on understandings of belonging grounded in newcomer youth lived experience. This report presents findings from two focus groups with a total of 26 participants, conducted in July 2024. Participants were aged 16-24, had arrived in Canada within the last five years, and were residents of Hamilton, Ontario. These focus groups captured a diverse group of newcomer youth, with participants citing varied backgrounds such as Afghan, Colombian, Egyptian, Haitian, Jordanian, Nigerian, Pakistani, South Sudanese, and Ukrainian.

The findings from these focus groups reveal that "belonging" is a tangible element of day-to-day life for newcomer youth, informing various aspects of how they seek to become a part of Canada's social fabric. The results are presented as explorations of what belonging means to newcomer youth. Participants discussed definitions of belonging relating to ideas of home, community, and connection with people as well as surrounding environments. They expressed feelings of belonging regarding both Canada as well as their respective home countries, describing how **maintaining strong ties to cultural heritage is important in finding a place for themselves within a new and unfamiliar culture. Language** was emphasized as a key contributor to belonging as a way of establishing support systems and finding communities, as well as learning how to communicate with peers in English. Participants highlighted the **importance of feeling safe** in Hamilton; and as a result of feeling safe and comfortable in a new environment, they expressed joy in being able to explore Canada's outdoor spaces. They also described how **networks of friends and family** are foundational to a sense of belonging.

Newcomer youth find belonging in several communities that represent varied and intersecting facets of their identities. These included ethnic and cultural communities, religious communities, as well as communities built around shared interests and hobbies. **Participants discussed physical sites where**

they experience and engage in these communities, such as at school, in “third places” such as Jackson Square, and in green spaces and parks within the city, highlighting connections to social and environmental issues.

All participants responded that belonging was important to them, referring to hopes and aspirations for their future in Canada. **They seek to build this future and increase their sense of belonging in Hamilton over time through opportunities for community engagement and leadership such as volunteering, contributing to multicultural pluralism and cultural exchange, as well as utilizing available settlement support and resources.** Newcomer youth adapt to new environments and exercise agency in developing a sense of belonging, demonstrating that belonging is not a static phenomenon, but a process. Key challenges to feeling a sense of belonging in Hamilton that were mentioned include barriers to employment, unreliable public transportation, difficulties learning English, and adapting to a new culture.

Based on these results, there are several opportunities for HIPC and its member organizations to improve belonging for newcomer youth by investing resources and time towards addressing key issues, engaging youth directly in activities and initiatives, and pursuing further advocacy in newcomer youth economic stability, social inclusion, and community engagement. Recommendations include:

- Raising awareness of the issues newcomer youth have identified as priorities
- Advocacy to address key systemic and institutional barriers such as public transportation infrastructure and immigrant underemployment
- Strengthening partnerships with educational institutions
- Collaborative action amongst HIPC members to improve access to settlement services
- Revitalization and maintenance of public spaces
- Meaningful consultation and inclusion of Indigenous leaders
- Promoting the strengths of Hamilton’s diversity
- Providing more fun programming for newcomer youth.

FOCUS GROUP WORD CLOUD

A word cloud developed online at simplewordcloud.com from the combined transcripts of both focus group sessions, removing common English words (e.g., the, at, it, like).



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About Hamilton Immigration Partnership Council (HIPC)

HIPC is a community table whose members work together to create a positive settlement experience for newcomers. HIPC members represent settlement agencies, educational institutions, the private sector, municipal departments, persons with lived experiences of immigration and more. HIPC is funded by Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) and housed within the City of Hamilton's Economic Development Division.

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INTRODUCTION

Project Purpose

HIPC’s current strategic plan aims for newcomers to have a successful settlement experience and feel a sense of belonging in Hamilton. Recent research and engagement by HIPC uncovered the need to enrich our understanding of lived newcomer experiences by centring newcomer voices. “Immigrant Voices: Hamilton Immigrant Survey 2023” found that life satisfaction, sense of belonging, and perceptions of safety were relatively high among participants, but feelings of isolation and experiences of discrimination were also prominent.¹ These seemingly contradictory findings highlighted the need for further inquiry into what “belonging” actually means for immigrants, as this is a term that is difficult to translate into different languages, highly circumstantial, and based on individual experience. During the “Envisioning Successful Settlement and Belonging for Newcomers in Hamilton” community planning forum,² youth were identified as a priority population that required further consultation.

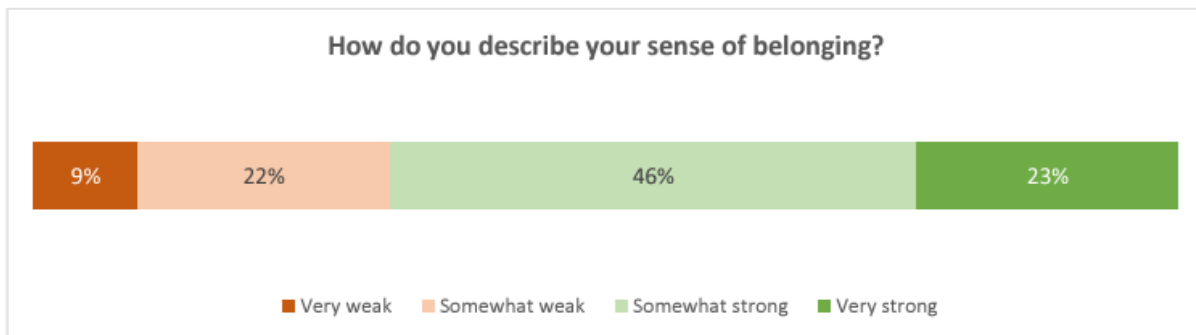


Figure 1. Results from HIPC 2023 Immigrant Survey ¹

This exploratory project builds on the above, asking how newcomer youth experience belonging in Hamilton, and how belonging might be improved. Data generated from this project

¹ “Immigrant Voices: Hamilton Immigrant Survey 2023 Report,” HIPC, Published November 2023, <https://hamiltonimmigration.ca/wp-content/uploads/HIPC-IS2023-report.pdf>

² “Envisioning Successful Settlement and Belonging for Newcomers in Hamilton,” HIPC, Published March 22, 2024, <https://hamiltonimmigration.ca/wp-content/uploads/Final-March-2024-HIPC-Community-Forum-Report-1.pdf>

will be useful for HIPC’s strategic planning purposes and may have other benefits as well. A focus group may be itself a medium through which a sense of belonging is fostered. Interaction among participants in a focus group can generate collective insight, and may promote empowerment among marginalized groups as a result of the collective experience.³ In this way, engaging newcomer youth in research goes beyond the transactional relationship of data collection alone; the focus group provides a venue for newcomer youth to share their stories, learn from their peers, become more civically engaged, and make meaningful contributions to advocacy so that their interests may be more authentically represented at a municipal level.

This project focuses on four key research questions:

1. How do newcomer youth aged 16-24 define the term “belonging” in their own words and languages?
2. What community or communities do they feel they belong to and why?
3. To what degree do they feel they belong or are connected?
4. What do they feel would help to improve their sense of belonging in Hamilton?

Literature Review and Context

Belonging is a subjective experience that is not always easily defined. Definitions of belonging in academic literature include viewing it as “the experience of personal involvement in a system or environment so that persons feel themselves to be an integral part of that system or environment”.⁴ For newcomers, a sense of belonging is closely related to social integration in Canada, which can be defined as “the process by which newcomers become part of the social, cultural and institutional fabric of the host community or society while at the

³ Alexandra C. Smith, Crooks, Claire V. Crooks, and Linda Baker, “‘You Have to be Resilient’: A Qualitative Study Exploring Advice Newcomer Youth Have for Other Newcomer Youth.” *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal* 40, no. 6 (2022): 761–771, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10560-021-00807-3>

⁴ Bonnie M. K. Hagerty, Judith Lynch-Sauer, Kathleen L. Patusky, Maria Bouwsema, and Peggy Collier, “Sense of belonging: A vital mental health concept.” *Archives of Psychiatric Nursing* 6, no. 3 (1992): 172–177, [https://doi.org/10.1016/0883-9417\(92\)90028-h](https://doi.org/10.1016/0883-9417(92)90028-h)

same time retaining their own cultural identity”.⁵ One study found that when immigrants engage with both their heritage culture and with the new society, they adapt better psychologically and socio-culturally than if they relate to only one, or neither, cultural community.⁶ In this way, a sense of belonging to their home country can act as a cultural anchor for newcomers.

Within the broader context of newcomer belonging in Canada, HIPC’s work towards improving settlement outcomes and fostering a sense of belonging exists within a challenging and complex social and political landscape. Some scholars argue that while Canada has made great strides in improving settlement policies, these policies also tend to overgeneralize the diversity of immigrant experiences and do not interrogate how to address social inequality and create conditions where immigrants are meaningfully included.⁷ The ability to claim belonging is always “linked to issues of power and inequality;”⁸ therefore, it is important to centre personal experiences within a context of systemic and institutional exclusion. In this way, the onus of finding belonging is not placed on the individual but is rather situated within a wider community and political landscape.

Linking back to the recommendations from HIPC’s immigrant survey, meaningful inclusion of newcomer youth requires a further investigation of belonging beyond asking respondents whether or not they as individuals feel a sense of belonging in Hamilton. These focus groups sought to uncover the wider social dimensions of belonging for newcomer youth so that they could be addressed through meaningful advocacy and integrated at a foundational level in HIPC’s next community plan.

⁵ James Frideres, “Creating an inclusive society: promoting social integration in Canada.” In *Immigration and integration in Canada in the twenty-first century*, ed. John Biles, Meyer Burstein, and Tom Aiken (Kingston: School of Policy Studies Queen's University, 2008), 77-101.

⁶ John W. Berry and Feng Hou, “Immigrant Acculturation and Wellbeing in Canada.” *Canadian Psychology / Psychologie Canadienne* 57, no. 4 (2016): 254–264, <https://doi.org/10.1037/cap0000064>

⁷ Glynis George and Erwin D. Selimos, “Searching for belonging and confronting exclusion: A person-centred approach to immigrant settlement experiences in Canada.” *Social Identities* 25, no. 2 (2019): 125–140, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2017.1381834>

⁸ Vanessa May, *Connecting Self to Society: Belonging in a Changing World* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 104.

METHODS

As HIPC strives to improve successful settlement for newcomers to Canada and help them to feel a sense of belonging in Hamilton, this project was designed in accordance with HIPC's core operating principle of leveraging immigrant leadership and the inclusion of newcomer voices. In order to do justice to their stories, it is necessary to recognize the importance of storytelling for engaging and empowering youth, valuing them as experts of their own lived experience with rich insights to share. The focus groups were designed to allow participants to express their feelings as open-ended narratives through oral and visual storytelling, aiming to explore the complexity of multiple dimensions of belonging which immigrants experience.

Two focus groups were conducted with 26 newcomer youth in Hamilton during July 2024. One session took place during a LINC (Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada) class at Mohawk College, and the other was hosted privately at a local coffee shop, with registration open to the public. Participants were included in the focus groups if they were 16–24 years old, identified as a refugee or immigrant living in Canada for five years or less, and were a current resident of Hamilton, Ontario. Each focus group session began with facilitator and interpreter (if applicable) introductions, followed by a brief icebreaker activity with participants. After this, a photo discussion activity took place. Participants were asked to provide one or two photos beforehand which represented what belonging in Hamilton meant to them. The photos were projected onto a screen or passed around to be shared with the group while the participant described briefly in their own words the significance of the photo. The facilitator then asked follow-up questions to the group regarding the photo. After a short break, participants were asked by the facilitator to respond to a series of questions related to belonging. A more detailed description of the focus group participants, recruitment strategy, and research procedure is included in the Appendix.

RESULTS

What does “belonging” mean to newcomer youth?

A central goal of this project was to investigate how newcomer youth defined belonging in their own words and to conceptualize what a sense of belonging in Hamilton meant and looked like for these individuals. Definitions of belonging that arose from discussions centered around ideas of home, culture, and language, both in Canada and in respective countries of origin, as well as connection to community, friends, and family. Participants also described how it felt to lack a sense of belonging in Hamilton, expressing that without belonging they felt out of place and disconnected from their surroundings.

Newcomer youth talked positively about experiences of belonging in Hamilton, describing it as a city with much to offer in terms of resources, support, and opportunities. Some perceived belonging as an individual experience of whether one feels like they fit in and are welcomed and accepted. Others perceived belonging as a process of contributing to the social fabric of the city through engaging in communal activities such as school, work, occupying community spaces, and being a part of something larger than themselves as individuals. One participant encapsulated this feeling by describing what a sense of belonging meant to them as a tangible element of their day-to-day life, *“For example when you are moving around in the city, seeing some beautiful things and feeling like you are a part of this.”*

Cultural Heritage

While newcomer settlement in Canada depends to a certain extent on adapting to customs and expectations of Canadian culture, newcomer youth highly value their cultural heritage. **Being able to maintain ties to their respective home countries acts as a cultural anchor which helps to foster a sense of belonging in Canada**, including by meeting other people with the same background. For example, one participant shared: *“In my school we are mostly Nigerians, so I feel very at home naturally.”* Another explained, *“I need to visit with Ukrainians every Friday evening. And we spend some time together, sometimes we dance. Usually we bring some food. And we just share how our week went.”* Essentially, youth gain a

sense of belonging in Hamilton when they are able to find others who share their cultural heritage because this common ground creates a basis for social connection.

Staying connected to their cultural heritage also helped participants to reconcile feelings of belonging to more than one country at the same time. As one participant put it, *“I'm in Canada, but I still have to love my country because I was born in that country. I still have the memories, I still have family there, so I can't just say that I'm Canadian now. I still have to have that original piece of myself, but I think my country is Canada.”* For this newcomer, heritage is a part of their identity which cannot be abandoned when they are embracing a new home. Participants felt a sense of belonging in Canada when the communities to which they belong were represented and valued in Canadian society. For example, individuals who felt connected to the Muslim community expressed that having halal food options available in Canada helped them to feel a sense of belonging.

Language

For newcomer youth, language was a very influential factor in their sense of belonging. **Similar to finding connection with others who share ethnic and cultural identity, participants expressed feelings of commonality and kinship amongst others who spoke the same language.** A participant from the LINC class at Mohawk College described making friends in class on the basis of shared language, and relying on each other as a support network both inside and outside of the classroom: *“When we come to the class, we are talking Arabic. So when I'm talking Arabic, then we have a communication together, that's first one. And we help each other as friends. When we go outside, we help each other.”*

Learning English is a key part of newcomer settlement and integration in Canada. Participants stressed the importance of this for their sense of belonging, emotional wellbeing, being able to navigate the city, and connecting with others. One participant stated, *“The most important one to newcomers, understand the language. Being in Canada you should understand the language because we're gonna take a bus, go to class. You should know the language, because all those people in Canada speak English. Some people that doesn't speak English, what we should do? How will we understand each other?”* Mohawk College was cited as an important

institution contributing valuable services and resources to help newcomer youth learn English, particularly through LINC classes. Many participants discussed their efforts to learn English as a pillar of their journeys in adapting to life in Hamilton.

Learning English and thereby becoming comfortable communicating with others is a key enabling factor of belonging in Canada. It can foster greater connection with peers and bridge the gap between maintaining cultural heritage and finding identity in a new culture. One participant talked about relating to others through a love for English movies, describing language as something which enables belonging by way of finding peers with common interests.

Safety

According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs,⁹ feeling a sense of belonging is predicated upon basic needs being met, including safety. HIPC's first operating principle, "advocating for the basic needs of newcomers",¹⁰ recognizes this as a foundation undergirding belonging. While Maslow's understanding of pathways to self-actualization has been critiqued by some, it represents a valuable framework to understand the concept of belonging as a process, as reflected by focus group participants who described their sense of belonging changing over time. They outlined steps such as comfort and safety which they seek prior to seeking a sense of belonging. **Participants emphasized the importance of feeling safe as a basic need and a prerequisite for belonging.** In the words of one LINC student, *"being newcomers, everything is new. After that, the newcomers search about life safety, life comfortable, then belonging comes after that. You feel this country, but if you feel comfortable, then you will feel safe."*

While many immigrants and refugees come to Canada to seek safety, migration can also cause feelings of alienation within individuals who are not familiar with their surroundings. One participant described how they perceived that Canadian-born individuals felt safer in Hamilton because they knew the city better, saying, *"We're not from this place, you know. When you born from this city you will feel, like for example you feel safe. Because you born from this city. .*

⁹ "Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs," Research History, Accessed August 12, 2024, <https://www.researchhistory.org/2012/06/16/maslows-hierarchy-of-needs/?print=1>

¹⁰ "What We Do," HIPC, Accessed August 20, 2024, <https://hamiltonimmigration.ca/what-we-do/>

. *so you are a part of this place.*” This participant went on to describe how it takes time to feel comfortable and safe after arriving in Canada. They took several months to become familiar with places around the city, and after about seven months they felt more comfortable navigating their surroundings, again describing belonging as an active process that changes over time.

Many participants emphasized the relative safety of Canada compared to their home countries. Safety was described as a pull factor influencing the decision to migrate to Canada, as one participant explained, *“Why we are coming here? Because we don't feel safety in my back home. We don't have a future for the younger people. That's why we come in here. . . We feel safety here and comfortable.”* Another participant related, *“I feel safer here with the war that is happening back home.”* In this way, the perceived greater safety in Canada enabled belonging because the basic need to feel safe was met. Discussions during these focus groups did not delve deeper into definitions of safety, such as whether newcomer youth value physical safety, social safety, economic and political stability, or other dimensions of safety, so this may be an area of further research interest.

Friends and Family

Participants talked extensively about how making new friends in Canada contributed to their sense of belonging as well as to identity formation during their formative stage of life. They expressed the difficulties they felt as young people, as one participant related, *“There's just this constant feeling of will I fit in with this certain group of people, will I be able to have the same interests as this certain group of people? You have to look at can I be friends with them, but can they also be friends with me? Do I have to change who I am to be friends with them?”* Questions such as these are universal among youth, but for newcomers they are compounded with migration-induced changes in social environment.

Newcomer youth must navigate making new friends while also reconciling loss and loneliness from leaving friends and family back home. One participant reminisced on memories from their childhood, *“In Jordan, I have money, friends, I feel good over there. My family back home, my grandma, my friends in Jordan. When I come to here, they mention parties. When we*

was growing up, a lot of parties. I feel some places in Jordan, when I just remember, I feel belonging.” They expressed strong feelings of belonging to their home country, perhaps feeling like they are missing out on parties and other experiences. As a result of challenges to the previously mentioned elements of belonging such as cultural heritage, language, and safety, newcomer youth seek social connection and the support of friends and family to feel like they belong in Canada.

Having existing support networks allowed some newcomer youth to feel a greater degree of belonging. When asked if they had an easier time or harder time than older generations in adapting to life in Canada, some participants expressed that it was easier for them because they already had family members living in Canada, while their parents had to make do with no familiar faces around them.

Photos that were shared during the photo discussion activity largely featured participants spending time with friends and family. During the LINC class session, many shared that they had made new friends at Mohawk College and relied on them for support and companionship both inside and outside of the classroom. Participants often found connection with peers through shared cultural heritage, religion, and language. Making new friends in Hamilton and having robust family networks in Canada is a strong enabler of belonging.

Where does belonging take place?

In addition to discussing definitions of belonging and identifying factors that enable belonging, newcomer youth participants noted several spaces and locations where belonging takes place. The key sites of belonging participants identified were school, ethnic/cultural/religious community spaces, as well as Hamilton’s green spaces and “third spaces”.

School

The most frequently discussed location for meeting friends, engaging in cultural activities, and learning critical skills to adapt to life in Canada was at school. There was consensus among participants in the LINC class focus group session that Mohawk College was

an important site of belonging. The photo discussion activity during this session featured many photos of participants at Mohawk College or with new friends they had met in class. As one student described, *“This photo means a lot to me. This because I made new friends here, I learn a lot from this program. Also the teacher, the teachers have led the way for the student. But as a newcomer, I come to this college to study.”* As mentioned in the previous section, language is an enabling factor for belonging, so attending LINC classes and learning English with their peers helps to improve belonging for newcomer youth. Participants also mentioned learning about opportunities to engage in the broader community through Mohawk College, such as finding out in class about Canada Day celebrations taking place at Bayfront Park.

Several participants talked about experiences of belonging at McMaster University. For one participant, who is a McMaster student, the university was the central location of belonging because it was where they met the majority of their new friends in Canada. Another participant who was a high school student described connecting with like-minded individuals and finding a group of friends through McMaster University’s Black Student Success Centre.

High school students represented a significant portion of participants, especially in the independent focus group session. They extensively discussed participating in extra-curricular activities at school, as well as the importance of their friends, teachers, and guidance counselors in helping them as newcomers. Newcomer youth described highly valuing academic success in addition to social integration at school. This was where they learned English and gained the education necessary to build a future in Canada. Other things participants described learning about in school included essential tasks such as how to file taxes and how to sort recycling and garbage. As well, leadership opportunities at school helped youth to feel like they belong, as one participant explained, *“I was also Vice President of my Student Council. So I always felt needed [there], and like I’m valued.”*

Community Organizations and “Third Spaces”

The concept of “third spaces” refers to places outside of the home (the first place) and the workplace or school (the second place); these are places where people go to converse with

others and connect with their communities.¹¹ Parks and outdoor spaces are examples of third spaces, elaborated on further in the next section. **Newcomer youth discussed other examples of third spaces such churches, mosques, and community centres.** Notably, many participants also mentioned spending time at Jackson Square, highlighting this as a central hub for youth and a place to meet with friends away from parental or adult supervision. This reflects the importance of third spaces for newcomer youth in developing independence.

Outside of immediate circles of family and friends, participants also expressed belonging to various spaces in the broader Hamilton community. When asked which communities they felt they belonged to, the majority of newcomer youth cited ethnic, cultural, and religious communities. Being able to attend a mosque or a church provided a venue for connecting with their community and was another example of a space where they made friends and established networks of support. Aspects of culture such as food and music helped participants to connect with their heritage and find a sense of belonging in a new country through visiting restaurants or attending cultural festivals. Many youth talked about celebrations and events, particularly Eid, as a way of connecting to their cultural and religious communities. As one participant put it, *“When I first came here, I met some Egyptian friends. They made life easy for me because we celebrated Eid together, got along together. So it made me feel like I belong here.”*

Some participants also discussed hobbies and interests, finding community in Hamilton with like-minded individuals with whom they can participate in fun activities such as art, music, and running. Another major area of community which participants discussed was engagement with community organizations. One participant talked about their experience working at their local community center as a digital literacy coach. They described this as an opportunity to connect with peers, give back to the community, and participate in fun excursions such as a trip to the planetarium at McMaster University.

¹¹ Madeleine Roberts-Ganim, “Third Places: What Are They and Why Are They Important to American Culture?,” *The University of Chicago English Language Institute*, November 1, 2023, <https://esl.uchicago.edu/2023/11/01/third-places-what-are-they-and-why-are-they-important-to-american-culture>

Green Spaces

In addition to finding connection through their communities, many participants talked about their experiences of belonging in relation to geographic spaces. These are places where they meet friends, host celebrations, participate in events, and connect to Canada through the natural environment. One participant articulated why being able to do activities outdoors meant a lot to them and differentiated Canada in a positive way from their home country, saying *“As a child, it was a huge thing to go outside because the environment was unsafe. So we usually stay inside. So when I started exploring Canada more, I got to know that I have my own freedom here. When I was staying inside my house for my entire childhood, I could feel myself feeling like there's nothing outside of this, just me in my room that's it.”* This quote demonstrates why it is important to highlight outdoor spaces as locations which enable belonging for newcomer youth.

Specific green spaces in Hamilton which newcomer youth mentioned included Bayfront Park, Gage Park, Gore Park, and Confederation Beach. During the photo discussion activity, several participants shared photos of Canada Day celebrations at Bayfront Park, and many participants discussed Bayfront Park as a central location they enjoy visiting with friends and family. Participants also shared stories of hobbies and outdoor activities they enjoy, which fostered a sense of belonging by allowing them to express themselves or connect with others with similar interests. One participant who enjoyed running with their friends said, *“I usually run in Gage Park because it's close to my home.”* Another participant who enjoyed graphic design and art as a hobby stated, *“Sometimes I go to Confederation Beach. I will take some books and pencils.”*

One participant shared a photo of a small park near their apartment. They recounted how this was one of the first places in Canada they came to know, and they frequently visited it alone. Later on when their family also came to Canada, they could show their family around and take them to this park, knowing that it was a nice outdoor space nearby for picnics, holiday celebrations, and just to hang out with their brother. The participant expressed that they felt a sense of belonging by knowing places to go in Hamilton and being able to act as a local guide for their other newcomer friends and family.

As a result of feeling safe and comfortable in a new environment, newcomer youth expressed joy in being able to explore new parts of Canada and participate in outdoor events and activities. Outdoor spaces represent an important enabling factor for belonging, and participants highlighted the significance of these spaces in being connected to Hamilton and feeling like they are a part of this city. This was a novel direction that has not been explored in much of the literature around belonging for newcomers. The fact that these conversations largely occurred during the photo discussion activity speaks to the value of creative engagement with newcomer youth through mediums such as art, photography, and storytelling to uncover new ideas and directions for how newcomer settlement can be better understood.

Challenges to Belonging in Hamilton

Newcomer youth participants identified a number of challenges that hindered a sense of belonging in Hamilton, including barriers to employment, balancing multiple responsibilities, difficulty learning English, difficulties with transportation, social isolation around holidays, and adaptation to life in Canada.

With regards to career development challenges and barriers to employment, newcomer youth expressed that it was not only difficult to find a job within their chosen field in line with their skills and qualifications, but to find any job at all. They felt that this largely resulted from lack of Canadian work experience, and some described systemic barriers of previous work experience from their home country not being recognized as legitimate.

Some newcomer youth participants described the challenges of entering the job market for the first time in their lives. One participant explained why it was difficult to search for a job when they had no prior experience, stating, *“When you are still young, you don’t have a lot of experience, so it’s quite challenging to get a job. For example, maybe you were never working because you are young, you are starting. But when you come and think that I want to work, I want to apply, the first thing that is challenging is my resume. So whenever I want to apply for a job and there is nothing that can qualify me to get the job, they will not consider you.”* This participant expressed feeling lost and not knowing where to begin when they first sought to enter the labour force. Barriers to employment represent a challenge to belonging because

when newcomer youth cannot find good jobs, they feel disconnected from Canadian institutions and systems and face difficulties getting their basic needs met.

One participant expressed challenges around balancing the demands of work, school, and supporting their family with settling in Canada. This individual knew English well, so they would often help interpret and translate for the rest of their family in addition to their many other responsibilities. They wanted to prioritize studying, however they felt obligated to support their family at the same time. Many other participants related to this story and expressed similar struggles with balancing work and school, often leaving limited time to devote to their social lives.

There was consensus among participants that learning English is a central element of belonging in Hamilton, and therefore a major challenge for many. Fluency levels in English varied widely amongst participants, so it is possible that some discussions were limited during the focus groups because of language barriers.

Several participants expressed barriers they faced in getting around, as one explained, *“The transportation is a big challenge that we face every day, because in Ukraine and in other European countries you don't need to have a car. You don't need to drive. You can just get around the city by public transportation. And there are so many barriers here posed by inability to drive, and I cannot even get my license quick because I have to wait so many months just to take the exam.”* A few other participants echoed this sentiment, with some older individuals stating that they used to drive in their home country, so they were used to having a car and getting around independently. However, they cited how expensive it is to own a car in Canada and how long it takes to obtain a driver's license as major barriers.

As mentioned in previous sections, holidays and celebrations represent a positive way to connect with various communities. However, engaging such occasions may look very different for newcomer youth in Canada compared to in their home countries. One participant explained, *“back home for Eid, we used to celebrate together. We used to get the day off from school or work, but over here when you're celebrating Eid you have to take a day off. . . Back home you get your cousins, your family, they visit you and you go outside. You would get a day off and you don't have to worry. But over here you have to take a day off, worry about the day,*

the hours of work that you go.” In this way, Canadian culture systemically excludes many non-Christian religious observances. Privileging certain religious holidays over others – such as statutory holidays around Christmas and Easter – is an area of inequality in Canadian society.

Similarly, when Canadians take time off from work or school to spend time with friends and family around Christmas, this may be a time when newcomers are not socially included. One participant expressed feeling isolated upon first arriving in Canada during the holiday season, saying *“In Canada, there's lots of occasions in December, like Christmas, New Year. So it was hard for me to make friends. I waited for the winter semester to begin, which was in January. . . I couldn't connect with anyone until the first of January. I was able to finally start my semester and go to the University and make more friends.”* The focus group conversations around holidays varied, with some youth saying that they felt isolated during the holiday season in December, while others found belonging through volunteering at community Christmas events. These differing experiences highlight the need to make the holidays more inclusive for newcomer youth.

Additional challenges mentioned included adjusting to new responsibilities such as paying taxes and managing finances. Participants also mentioned Canadian winters as a challenge, especially not knowing how to dress warmly, how to get around in the snow, and physically adjusting to changes in climate from their home country. As described below, youth find various means of adapting and learning about living in a new culture and the multitude of responsibilities that this entails.

How do newcomer youth adapt to life in Canada?

Newcomer youth indicated that belonging is important to them, and they situated definitions of belonging within the context of adapting to new environments. Participants expressed that coming to Canada meant leaving behind connections, communities, and an entire life that they had built back home to arrive in Hamilton and be met with a whole new way of living. They did not want to disengage from their countries of origin, and in fact held strong ties to their families and friends back home. Migrating to a new country and having to form entirely new networks in order to live, work, and get around meant that experiencing

belonging was not only an emotional need, but a matter of survival. One participant articulated this by saying, *“For me it's important to feel like I belong because I came to Canada alone and a lot of connections and a lot of relationships that I had in Ukraine, I cannot sustain anymore. Because of the time gap, power outages and so on. That's why I'm looking for places where I can get sense of community. Where I can express myself. And I want to feel like there is someone close to me who can support me.”*

Newcomer youth actively seek to adapt to life in Canada, engaging in processes of building and creating a sense of belonging for themselves through volunteering, cultural exchange, and utilizing settlement resources. When asked if they feel more of a sense of belonging in Canada or in their home country, the vast majority of participants said that they felt a stronger sense of belonging in Canada. This is because they felt Canada is where their home is in the present, and also where they envision their future. One participant expressed feeling like they needed to give back in some way to Canada *“because Canada has done a lot for me. When I needed something, Canada provided for me.”*

A few participants expressed gratitude for being able to pursue careers and educational opportunities in Canada that were not available to them in their countries of origin. Additionally, women-identifying participants described overcoming barriers they faced due to traditional gender roles, often imposed on them by parents or older family members. Their stories conveyed valuing the perceived freedom and equality afforded in Canadian society. One participant related, *“I think for me it's so different because my mother is always just thinking oh, you get married and you have children, and you cannot study. But I come in Canada, so I know women can become anything I want. It's not same in my country, my mother say you marry. Before this, I go to Malaysia, and my mother wanted me to marry someone. It's very tough for me. . . When I come here I saw it's different life, now I can do anything. I can work, I can study.”* This sentiment was echoed by several other women-identifying participants.

Volunteering

Several youth discussed their experiences with volunteering in the community, and how this was an important activity through which they found greater connection to Hamilton.

Examples included volunteering at HIPC's Newcomer Day, at a school bake sale that raised funds for Empowerment Squared, and at a charity Christmas event hosted by the Good Shepherd Centre in Hamilton. They described these as fun ways to get to know their peers and fellow volunteers, as well as broaden their horizons and familiarize themselves with the Hamilton community at large.

One participant who was friends with another participant in the focus group praised her friend for engaging in community services that led to volunteer opportunities, emphasizing this as a great achievement for which she was proud of her friend. She explained, "*[NAME] attended English school at the same community centre where I coach. When we were promoting our courses, [NAME] registered and she passed all the digital literacy courses. And then she stayed for, I don't know, maybe a month volunteering and helping teach others. So, she learned herself, and then taught.*" The individual referred to in this quote began with learning, and then pursued volunteering as a way to solidify learning, promote personal growth, make lasting friendships, and find a greater sense of belonging.

Youth highly value these opportunities to engage with the community in leadership roles that enhance their experiences and prepare themselves for the future. They often hear about these opportunities at school from their guidance counselors or through various community connections. A few participants mentioned participating in the Pathways to Education program at school, which provides volunteer opportunities and offers scholarships to students with high volunteer hours. By engaging with the Hamilton community and enhancing future prospects, volunteering is a strong enabling factor of belonging for newcomer youth.

Cultural Exchange

Participants discussed how Canada's diversity helped them find a place to belong. **Newcomer youth valued being in a multicultural environment where all people can coexist and feel accepted, welcomed and understood.** They also enjoyed learning about other cultures and experiencing new things. A group of friends in the LINC class session talked about their regular get-togethers where they tried new cultural cuisines together at different restaurants every weekend. One participant explained their perception of Canadian multiculturalism,

stating, *“All the people here in Canada have different culture. But all the people, especially the Canadian people understand other people. Like whatever, she wears hijab, he goes to mosque or he goes to church, all the people here like it’s same. They understand each other.”*

A few participants talked about experiences of cultural exchange at school. One participant shared a group photo of their classmates dressed in their cultural clothing for “It’s a Small World” day at school, where students were encouraged to bring food from their respective cultures for their classmates to try. Another participant talked about their journey to learn about and appreciate cultural exchange, stating, *“As I grow older, exploring new cultures and opening myself to people and learning more, and being respectful of people’s cultures. I have a sense of belonging to this country and I understand other people have their cultures.”* In this way, cultural exchange represents a form of growth and agency for newcomer youth to build a sense of belonging rooted in Hamilton’s diversity.

During these two focus group sessions, participants did not explicitly discuss experiences of discrimination. To the contrary, one participant expressed how they felt accepted because they did not experience religious discrimination in Hamilton and were free to practice religion however they pleased. As well, while holidays are often connected to certain religious communities, they can also be a way of transcending religious and cultural divisions. For example, one participant expressed feeling connected to Canadian culture by taking their younger siblings out trick-or-treating during Halloween.

The willingness for newcomer youth to engage in new traditions and customs speaks to how highly they value participating in a multicultural environment. This includes feeling seen and represented in Canadian society and being able to maintain connections to their cultural heritage. Through diversity-centred events at school, participants were able to showcase and share their own culture with others, in addition to experiencing new things. Participants positively engaged with other cultures and actively sought cultural exchange through trying new foods, and expressed feeling a greater degree of belonging when they experienced acceptance and tolerance of difference.

Accessing Resources and Services

In order to mitigate and address challenges to belonging, newcomer youth often sought out and accessed services available to them through settlement agencies and community organizations. Participants all agreed that employment and career development was a challenge. One newcomer spoke of their experience receiving career support at the Immigrants Working Centre (IWC), explaining, *“When I came here, I wanted to work, it wasn't easy for me so I went to IWC. I took some courses and they helped me. . . they provide me a counsellor who told me what to do. Because when I came here I didn't even know what to do. So that organization helped me a lot.”*

LINC classes are also a vital settlement service, and newcomer youth highlighted the importance of learning English as a foundational aspect of belonging in Canada and in Hamilton. For students, these classes were both an educational necessity, and also a space for social connection and inclusion. Participants during the LINC class focus group emphasized that Mohawk College was where they learned about many resources in career development, housing support, community events, and other services available to them as newcomers.

A couple of participants described experiences participating in summer programs at Empowerment Squared, developing skills in literacy and leadership. Another individual talked about volunteering with Empowerment Squared. One participant mentioned involvement on the HamOnt Youth Steering Committee and receiving leadership training as well.

DISCUSSION

Connections to Existing Research

Respondents to HIPC’s 2023 Immigrant Survey were asked about a wide range of experiences including employment, housing, well-being, and community integration.¹² Qualitative findings from this project enrich the survey results and quantitative data by adding narrative insight. Focus group participants highlighted their experiences of finding belonging within Hamilton’s diverse landscape of newcomers and provided unique perspectives of young people.

Participants in HIPC’s Community Planning Forum brought attention to a wide range of issues and identified youth as a priority population who require more attention and support to integrate.¹³ Certain issues from the Community Planning Forum were echoed in the focus groups, such as the challenges newcomer youth face in balancing studying, working, and helping family members with English translation. However, other areas identified from the Community Planning Forum did not arise in conversations with newcomer youth. For example, focus group participants expressed their desire to stay in Hamilton, and intentions of leaving Hamilton to look for better economic opportunities elsewhere were not mentioned. One participant elaborated; *“The city helps you. The city gives you a chance, so then also I will give the city a chance.”* This positive perspective may reflect newcomer youth determination, resilience, and desire to contribute to their communities.

The value of maintaining cultural heritage for positive integration into Canadian society was demonstrated by the focus group participants. A 2016 study on immigrant belonging created a framework for understanding the impact of interactions between belonging in Canada and in respective home or “source” countries through four main acculturation strategies: high sense of belonging to both their source country and to Canada (integration), high for Canada and low for home country (assimilation), low for Canada and high for source

¹² HIPC, “Immigrant Voices.”

¹³ HIPC, “Envisioning Successful Settlement.”

country (separation), and low for both (marginalisation).¹⁴ They found that those using the integration and assimilation strategies had the highest scores of life satisfaction and wellbeing, while separation and marginalisation had significantly lower scores.¹⁵ Newcomer youth participants in the focus groups most frequently expressed feeling a sense of belonging in both Canada and in their home countries, aligning with the integration acculturation strategy. A few focus group participants did mention that lacking feelings of safety in their home countries led to a greater sense of belonging in Canada, which may suggest some alignment with the assimilation acculturation strategy. Overall, however, newcomer youth participants maintained strong connections to their cultural heritage, in line with Berry and Hou's idea of a sense of belonging to respective source countries providing a cultural anchor for immigrants as they transition to a new society.

Results from this project that illustrate the systemic inequities newcomer youth face in adapting to life in Canada connect to the concepts explored by George and Selimos regarding Canada's "hierarchies of belonging".¹⁶ They argue that "the political dimension of belonging and exclusion – including the social, cultural, and economic policies and institutions that forge inclusion and membership – has been shaped by shifting immigration and citizenship policies that favour the demands of Canadian nation-building to reproduce its white, Euro-centric character."¹⁷ This can be seen in focus group findings such as the systemic exclusion of non-Christian religious observances.. Barriers to employment due to foreign work experience not being recognized as legitimate also exemplify the economic and political dimensions of belonging. By highlighting the systemic challenges they face, focus group participants demonstrated that Canada's social terrain of belonging is an uneven landscape for newcomer youth.

Participants in this project framed belonging as a dynamic process which they are actively involved in shaping. Similar to the participants in Smith et al.'s 2022 study which asked

¹⁴ Berry and Hou, "Immigrant Acculturation," 254.

¹⁵ Berry and Hou, "Immigrant Acculturation," 259.

¹⁶ George and Selimos, "Searching for belonging," 125.

¹⁷ George and Selimos, "Searching for belonging," 127.

young newcomers to Canada what advice they have for other newcomer youth, participants in this project demonstrated determination, resilience, and a desire to contribute to their communities. The findings from the 2022 study were organized into five overarching themes: (1) moving to a new country is hard, (2) maintain a healthy mindset, (3) take an active role in the adjustment process, (4) stay true to who you are, (5) and you are not alone.¹⁸ These results closely resemble the themes that participants in HIPC's newcomer youth focus groups conveyed regarding belonging. HIPC focus group participants shared experiences with each other and engaged in conversations building on each others' photos and stories, finding that amongst their newcomer youth peers, they were not alone.

Action Areas and Next Steps

The findings of these focus groups illuminate several areas where HIPC and its members can take action to improve settlement outcomes for newcomer youth and integrate a holistic understanding of belonging in the development of its next community strategic plan. Actions can include **raising awareness of issues newcomer youth have identified as priorities**. Settlement workers, educators, and newcomer-serving agencies can share the findings from this report with each other as well as with other newcomer youth who may relate to the experiences of their peers. As well, HIPC members should keep these findings in mind for strategic planning. A discussion of how HIPC can act is listed below, and addressing these issues may represent benefits for the larger Hamilton community.

In large part, the way that newcomer youth spoke about their experiences of belonging in Hamilton and in Canada suggested that they felt as though the onus of belonging was on them as individuals, and not necessarily on Canadian society to provide institutional support. Participants identified challenges related to systemic problems outside of their control, such as public transportation infrastructure, labour market inequities, and social isolation. **The role of HIPC and its members as advocacy bodies should be to address the gap in power that newcomer youth face in changing Canada's uneven social landscape, and to provide support**

¹⁸ Smith et al., "You Have to be Resilient," 761.

that is informed by further meaningful consultation with newcomer youth. HIPC members should also strive to make newcomer youth aware of their rights in Canada and encourage youth to directly engage in policy-making processes wherever opportunities arise.

One potential avenue for HIPC's future work towards improving newcomer youth belonging is to **explore opportunities for further collaboration with schools and post-secondary institutions**, in collaboration with the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board and the Hamilton-Wentworth Catholic District School Board, as well as Mohawk College and McMaster University. Participants mentioned school as a pillar of community and connection, and since schools are often the first point of contact to support newcomer youth well-being;¹⁹ teachers, faculty, and other educational staff may benefit from training on the specific cultural needs of newcomers to foster inclusive spaces. As well, since learning English was discussed as a high priority for belonging and cultural adaptation, HIPC and its members can further work with educational institutions to identify how English learning environments can be improved, promoted, and better utilized by newcomer youth.

HIPC works to bring stakeholders from the wide array of organizations in the settlement sector together as a collaborative community table. Newcomer youth participants mentioned several HIPC partners as contributing valuable services and resources that help in their journeys of belonging in Hamilton. The recent launch of the Newcomers in Hamilton Services Directory is an example of a useful tool which addresses several issues newcomer youth brought up, helping users to find assistance with employment, language skills, education, transportation, and civic life to feel at home in Hamilton. HIPC should continue to **promote access to information about essential services** that are available to newcomer youth in the community.

Participants discussed the importance of green spaces and third spaces, introducing a crucial area wherein municipalities can tangibly influence belonging for newcomer youth. Since participants highlighted the importance of these spaces to their sense of connection to Hamilton, HIPC should prioritize advocacy around third spaces, such as **maintenance and revitalization of public parks and recreational areas**. Additionally, while this was not explicitly

¹⁹ Smith et al., "You Have to be Resilient," 769.

discussed during the focus groups, the importance of the natural environment to newcomer youth can be a great potential avenue through which to build cultural bridges between immigrants and Canada's Indigenous communities. Hamilton is situated on the traditional territories of the Erie, Neutral, Huron-Wendat, Haudenosaunee and Mississaugas, and elders and youth from these communities should be consulted and meaningfully included in discussions on how to make Hamilton an inclusive space for all.

Furthermore, **including Indigenous voices** should be a foundational element of HIPC's community plan and the direction of HIPC's overall work. Participants emphasized the feelings of safety and connection associated with living in a diverse environment when everyone is able to feel respected, valued, and welcomed. HIPC already engages in initiatives promoting Hamilton as an inclusive space such as the Hamilton For All campaign. Future initiatives should recognize Indigenous knowledge on inclusion, addressing the fact that for immigrants, learning about Indigenous ways of knowing and being can be just as important for integrating into Canada as settlement within Canada's settler colonial institutions.

Direct youth engagement can work to address issues identified in this report. HIPC member activities to engage newcomer youth should keep in mind that **for young newcomers, like all young people, having fun is an important part of feeling welcomed in any community.** Newcomer initiatives often focus on addressing barriers and challenges to belonging, however it is equally as important to promote positivity, fun, and recognize the proclivity of young people towards resilience. Some examples of fun activities participants mentioned involved learning about other cultures through cultural heritage events at school or trying new cuisines and restaurants with friends. Newcomer youth found positive ways to engage with Canada's multicultural mosaic, and this helped them to feel represented and valued in Canadian society and also to integrate into the diverse landscape of Hamilton. Since participants expressed interest in cultural exchange and multicultural learning, there is much room for future directions of HIPC action and member activity towards fun programming in this area.

CONCLUSION

This project aimed to delve deeper into an understanding of what the complex concept of “belonging” truly means for newcomer youth. We found that newcomer youth’s definitions of belonging are just as varied and rich as their diverse experiences and backgrounds. While the commonly expected themes of home, community, connection, family, and friends came up in focus group discussions, many unique directions arose from these conversations. For newcomer youth, belonging can be something that is rooted and grows within an inclusive and welcoming environment; however, it is also something they are actively creating, a process of taking matters into their own hands to form connections, contribute to their communities, and build a future for themselves in Canada. This is where HIPC’s activities can make an impact in improving a sense of belonging and achieving successful newcomer settlement. HIPC can work with its members to promote better inter-sector collaboration and effective service delivery for youth, particularly in providing support for career development and volunteer opportunities. HIPC can also strengthen partnerships with schools, colleges, and universities, as these are critical venues for youth engagement.

When youth are engaged early on, they are more likely to continue to be civically engaged for life.²⁰ These focus groups were one way for newcomer youth to directly shape HIPC’s direction and participate in research that can be utilized by local immigration partnerships for municipal advocacy. HIPC member organizations have shared that there is demonstrated interest from the newcomer youth community in Hamilton in participating in future focus groups conducted by HIPC and its member organizations. Therefore, HIPC must continue to promote avenues for newcomer youth leadership and the meaningful inclusion of their voices.

²⁰ IAP2, “Tear Down the Open House: ‘Youth-ifying’ Engagement,” July 11, 2024, webinar recording and transcript, 14:25, <https://iap2canada.wistia.com/medias/vwzvze32z7>

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APPENDIX: METHODOLOGY

Researcher Positionality Statement

I conducted this research project during my time as a Program Assistant with HIPC, for my MSc practicum placement in Global Health at McMaster University. At the time of writing this report, I am a 27 year old woman. I immigrated to Canada from Bangladesh when I was a child, so I reflect on the formative experiences of my childhood as a specific context of finding belonging in a new country as a young person. This research connects deeply to my own personal and cultural background.

The focus group questions and overall research design were developed in collaboration with my supervisor Sarah Wayland; my colleagues at HIPC; Lisa Schincariol McMurtry, a consulting Senior Researcher at the Centre for Community Based Research; and representatives from HIPC member organizations and other agencies connected to HIPC. However, my perspectives of belonging as an immigrant shaped and influenced the direction of the research as I drew from expectations of things I wish I had been asked as a newcomer to Canada, how I envisioned a sense of belonging for myself, and my assumptions of how these questions would be perceived and responded to by young people in a similar position as I have been in before. As well, I took an active role in the conversations that took place during each focus group session to rephrase and reframe questions, and to ask follow-up questions. These discussions were undoubtedly shaped by my lived experiences, and therefore the biases inherent within my particular views and understandings.

Participants

Two focus groups were conducted with 26 newcomer youth in Hamilton during July 2024. One focus group was conducted during a Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) class at the Mohawk College Fennell Campus with 16 participants who were students in the class, and the teacher present in the classroom. The students in this class were at English benchmark level 2-3. Another was conducted at a local coffee shop in Hamilton after operating hours to use the venue as a private space, with 10 participants and 1 Arabic interpreter

assisting two of the participants. A purposive sampling strategy was used to recruit youth who met the following criteria: aged 16–24 years, identified as a refugee or immigrant, lived in Canada for 5 years or under, and a resident of Hamilton, Ontario.

These focus groups captured a diverse group of newcomer youth. Participants mentioned hailing from the following countries, however some backgrounds may not have been captured or explicitly mentioned.

- Afghanistan
- Colombia
- Egypt
- Haiti
- Jordan
- Kenya
- Nigeria
- Pakistan
- Saudi Arabia
- South Sudan
- Ukraine

Recruitment

During the focus group conducted at Mohawk College, the participants were all students in the Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) class and participated in the focus group during class time. This was arranged in collaboration with the class teacher, Agnes Kucharska, as well as the Mohawk College Newcomer Outreach and Engagement Officer, Lil Acive.

The other focus group was open to the public and publicized on HIPC social media, HamOnt Youth social media, and disseminated through HIPC member networks by agencies including the following:

- YMCA Newcomer Youth Centre
- Good Shepherd Family Centre Director
- Empowerment Squared

- Wesley
- Micah House
- Mohawk College
- Goodwill, The Amity Group
- Immigrants Working Centre (IWC)
- McMaster University Office of Community Engagement
- Latin American Network at McMaster
- McMaster International Student Office
- Spectrum
- Hamilton Public Library Communications Department

Students who had participated as volunteers for Hamilton Newcomer Day 2024 were also directly contacted via email to participate in a focus group. As part of the recruitment intake process, participants were asked if they required interpretation, and if so in which language, as well as if they required any other accommodations (e.g. childcare, physical accommodations, etc.)

Procedure

The focus group sessions began with introductions of facilitators, interpreters (if applicable), a brief overview of HIPC, and verbal declarations of informed consent. After this, an icebreaker activity was utilized to build rapport and allow youth to become acquainted with each other, the moderator, and the interpreter (during the independent session). It appeared that most youth knew each other during the session at the LINC class, and a few knew each other during the independent session. The icebreaker activity involved a series of low-risk statements during which youth were asked to respond by raising their hand if the statement applied to them (e.g. I am the youngest person in my family; I like to dance).

After that, a photo discussion activity was conducted to further build comfort and familiarity with sharing personal experiences of belonging using visual prompts. Photos were projected on a screen from those who had emailed their photos beforehand, responding to the following guiding questions:

1. What does your day to day life look like?
2. How would you visualize what community looks like to you?
3. Where in Hamilton do you feel the most at home, or the most like you fit in?
4. What places do you visit regularly where you feel like you have a role to play, or contribute in a meaningful way (e.g. work, school, places of worship)?
5. How do you envision your future in Hamilton? What are your goals and aspirations?

Youth were asked to describe how these images represent the idea of “sense of belonging” in Hamilton to them in 2 minutes or less. After their narrative, other participants were asked about their thoughts regarding the image, how it makes them feel, whether they relate to it with their own lived experience, etc. The content of these discussions is included in the analysis of results. After this photo discussion period was a short break, during which the audio recorder was turned off.

Returning from the break, participants were asked to respond to several questions as a facilitated discussion:

1. How do you define “belonging”? What does a sense of belonging mean to you?
 - a. Is it important to you to feel like you belong in Hamilton?
2. What community or communities do you feel you belong to in Hamilton or in Canada (e.g. cultural community, youth community, religious community, hobbies, interests, etc.)?
3. What settlement services or resources have you accessed, and how have these shaped your sense of belonging in Hamilton?
 - a. Have you participated in any activities or events that have helped you feel more connected to the Hamilton community?
4. Do you feel more of a sense of belonging in Canada or in your country of origin? Why?
 - a. What aspects of culture and community make you feel the most at home, both in Canada and in your country of origin?
5. How aware do you feel about your rights and responsibilities in Canada, and from where did you learn about this?

6. What do you think are challenges for young people in finding a sense of belonging in a new country?
 - a. Do you feel that your perspectives on belonging are different than that of your parents or that of older generations?

During the LINC class session, participants were encouraged to use their phones for machine translation if necessary, however the discussion took place in English. Discussion during the independent session was primarily in English as well, with an Arabic interpreter present at the request of two participants. For those two individuals, contribution to the discussion was made through the interpreter.

The total time for discussion of photos and facilitated discussion questions was around 90 minutes for each focus group. Participants were compensated with a \$20 gift card, and participants at the independent session were provided two bus tickets to compensate for transportation to the venue.

Informed Consent

The purpose of the study and the conditions for participation were discussed with youth prior to focus groups, and were prominently communicated in all promotional materials. Youth were also informed about the importance of privacy and agreed to keep all information shared in the focus groups and the identity of other participants confidential. A verbal consent script was prepared with detailed information about the use and storage of data, photos, and audio recording, and this was machine translated into 6 different languages and provided upon request to participants in their own language. The verbal consent script was read aloud during the beginning of each focus group session, and informed consent was obtained from every participant at the beginning of the session. An audio recorder was turned on at the beginning of the session, turned off during the break, and turned on again after the break.

Limitations

This project was conducted within a relatively short period of time, with fewer than 8 weeks from project initiation to the dates of the focus group sessions. Due to limitations of time, participants were recruited through existing HIPC networks and partner agencies. In the case of

the focus group conducted at Mohawk College, the LINC class provided a convenient structure, venue, and readily available group of participants. However, this means that participants were all familiar with each other prior to the focus group, so there were likely existing relationships, communication patterns, and social expectations of behaviour within this classroom setting that the focus group data is situated within.

As for the independent session at a local cafe, participants again were recruited through HIPC networks, therefore it is likely that our sample consists of newcomer youth who already have some form of connection to immigrant serving agencies in Hamilton. This means that the data is not necessarily generalizable to the overall newcomer youth population in Hamilton as it may not be representative of the views of newcomer youth with low levels of community engagement and connection to immigrant-serving agencies.

Additional limitations with the focus group format may be inherent in the timing of the two sessions. Since only one session was available for members of the public to register, it may not have been accessible to all who were interested in participating due to their work or class schedules, or other responsibilities and prior engagements. As well, since the focus groups were in person and participants were face to face with their peers, discussion around some particularly sensitive topics may not have come up, since the associated stigma with these discussions might have led participants to not want to divulge personal stories of a sensitive nature.



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