

# Mapping Immigrant Children's Ethnoracialized Identities in Canada: K–5 Muslim Students Share Stories with their Mothers

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Article abstract

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# Mapping Immigrant Children's Ethnoracialized Identities in Canada: K–5 Muslim Students Share Stories with Their Mothers

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## Abstract

This study investigates the schooling experiences of K–5 Muslim immigrant children to address the underexplored area of post-migration schooling within the Canadian context. Centered on the stories K–5 children share with their mothers, the study focuses on students' identity formation, sense of belonging, and academic performance. Theoretically grounded in critical race theory and decolonial education as conceptual frameworks, the research explores the multi-dimensional experiences of immigrant children, moving beyond the monolithic narratives often enacted by dominant power structures. Utilizing a qualitative methodological approach, the study engages 10 Muslim-identifying mothers in semi-structured interviews, revealing insights about the role of mothers as knowledge holders and validating K–5 immigrant students' schooling experiences. Findings indicate key themes including subtractive teacher practices, subversive allyship, racialization, marginalization, and the interplay of identity and religion. The study proposes targeted recommendations for school-based supports, teaching practice, and programs of teacher education to address post-migration schooling challenges.

*Keywords:* immigrant children, schooling, Canada, mothers, knowledge-holders, K–5, post-migration

## Résumé

Cette étude analyse les expériences scolaires d'enfants immigrants musulmans, de la maternelle à la 5e année au Canada, axées sur la formation de l'identité, le sentiment d'appartenance et la performance scolaire. Basée sur la théorie critique de la race et l'éducation décoloniale, elle explore les expériences multidimensionnelles des enfants, allant au-delà des récits monolithiques véhiculés par les structures de pouvoir dominantes. Utilisant une approche méthodologique qualitative, l'étude implique 10 mères musulmanes dans des entretiens semi-structurés, révélant le rôle des mères en tant que détentrices de savoir et validant les expériences scolaires des élèves immigrants. Les résultats mettent en évidence des thèmes clés tels que les pratiques soustractives des enseignants, l'alliance subversive, la racialisation, la marginalisation, et l'interaction entre l'identité et la religion. L'étude propose des recommandations ciblées pour les soutiens scolaires, les pratiques pédagogiques, et les programmes de formation des enseignants afin d'aborder les défis de la scolarisation post-migratoire.

*Mots-clés* : enfants immigrants, scolarisation, Canada, mères, détentrices de savoir, maternelle à 5e année, post-migration

## Introduction

Examining and interpreting the different dimensions of K–5 immigrant children's schooling experiences offers crucial insights into a robust understanding of factors influencing students' sense of belonging, academic performance, and identity development. These insights stand out against the backdrop of Canada's projection that children from immigrant backgrounds will make up 49% of the population by 2036 (Statistics Canada, 2017). Existing scholarship on immigrant students has primarily centred on the impact of discrimination on youth (Brabant et al., 2016), yet the schooling experiences of K–5 immigrant children in the Canadian context remains underexplored.

In an effort to address this gap in the literature, this study explores tensions and struggles faced by K–5 immigrant students in Toronto, drawing upon a critical analysis of narratives shared by children between the ages of six to 10 with their mothers. The study engages with 10 Muslim-identifying mothers, crafting narratives about students' percep-

tion of belonging, social inclusion and exclusion, identity formation, and racialization, as well as experiences of joy. The interviewed mothers were from countries such as Egypt, Turkey, Sudan, Pakistan, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Bangladesh, and Lebanon. This diversity enriches the study by including a variety of cultural and geographic perspectives within the Muslim community.

The participants were primarily either pursuing a PhD at a higher education institution in Ontario or their partners were engaged in graduate-level education at an Ontario university. To avoid potential essentialization and reductionism that might arise from codifying complex identities and experiences, this study notes that Muslim-identifying mothers with postgraduate degrees do not represent the entirety of the Muslim population in Canada. The majority of the participants also came from educated, professional backgrounds, suggesting a degree of financial security and social and economic mobility. Further, Muslim immigrants come from different countries with diverse histories and cultures, and their struggles with aspects of Islamophobia in Canada differ. Recognizing the potential limitations of this sample to fully represent the wide range of experiences within Muslim families in Toronto, the educational profile of these participants does offer unique insights into a particular stratum of the immigrant community.

Beyond educational and professional profiles of the participants, it is imperative to acknowledge the role of mothers as primary caregivers in immigrant families. These mothers' immersion in their children's lives and their deep interactions with them through storytelling, allows for narratives to become a vital mode of communication for understanding their children's daily experiences and emotional dynamics (Yahya, 2016; Sayer et al., 2004). The narratives offer an alternative perspective of schooling and education, providing a platform to validate their experience by centring the stories of children at the K–5 level. These immigrant mothers' profound awareness and insight into their children's schooling experiences position them as valuable knowledge holders, enriching our understanding of children's experiences in Canadian educational settings.

## **Immigrant Children's Schooling Experiences in Canada**

Research on immigrant students' schooling experiences provides insight into how schooling "constructs hierarchies of belonging by measuring how much members of minority groups adhere to dominant cultural values" (Eliassi, 2021, p. 249). For immigrant students, social spaces like schools become sites of struggle where they oscillate between forces of transformation and preservation, contingent on their access to power and resources (Apple, 2013; Bourdieu, 1998; Thomson, 2016; Villegas & Brady, 2019). Immigrant students encounter multiple tiers of systemic and structural inequalities, which include social, cultural, and linguistic dimensions (Oliveira, 2021; Polat & Kröner, 2022; Verhoeven, 2011).

Scholarship on immigrant students' schooling experiences, primarily focused on language, culture, and identity, has been approached through three primary research prisms: ethnography, multicultural inquiry, and cross-cultural narrative inquiry (Connelly et al., 2008; Sharma, 2018). This corpus of research explores a spectrum of topics, ranging from acculturation and enculturation (Hakim-Larson & Menna, 2015; Kim & Alamillo, 2017; Pérez et al., 2021; Suárez-Orozco et al., 2011) to intersectionality including race, class, gender, and ethnicity (Crenshaw, 2017; Free & Križ, 2022; Harju-Luukkainen & McElvany, 2018; Valdez & Golash-Boza, 2017), extending to the sphere of multicultural literacy (Archakis et al., 2018; Catala, 2019; Pagani & Paolini, 2020).

Building on the recognition that dominant societal discourses perpetuate oppressive structures in educational settings (Bejarano & Valverde, 2012; Castro-Salazar & Bagley, 2010; Connelly et al., 2008; Free & Križ, 2022; Xu et al., 2007), Adair (2015) outlined four categories of discrimination frequently experienced by immigrant students: (1) adverse interaction with school staff and peers, including derogatory remarks concerning accents and physical appearances; (2) constricted learning environments, emphasizing standardized testing; (3) low academic expectations informed by deficit mentality; and (4) devaluation of students' complex cultural and language skills.

The intersection of immigrant status and religious identity can further intensify experiences of marginalization. Garner and Selod (2015) underline the racialization of Muslims, where religion significantly contributes to perceived differences. Documented instances of Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism in Canadian educational settings notably involve the stereotyping and devaluation of Muslim students' cultures, identities,

and practices (Ali, 2012; Alizai, 2021; Amjad, 2018; Jamil, 2022; Wilkins-Laflamme, 2018;; Zine, 2004a). Reported instances of aggression toward Muslim students in schools (Bakali, 2016; Hindy, 2016; Zine, 2004b) also include the experiences of discrimination faced by Syrian immigrant children, aggravated by an apparent lack of educator intervention or support (Guo et al., 2019). It is important to note that these experiences are not universal among all Muslim immigrants, and the presence and severity of such experiences can vary significantly depending on a multitude of factors. Recognizing this diversity also disrupts the colonial practice of knowledge gatekeeping, and challenges the notion of “saving” those considered oppressed. Consequently, the study engages with the experiences and narratives of joy alongside struggle from the mothers and students, resisting a one-dimensional view of marginalized communities.

This study reflects the schooling experiences of immigrant children whose parents study at a higher education institution in Ontario, through the stories these students share with their mothers. The research engages with stories that reveal normalization of abuse, racialization, the weaponization of democratic principles (Gabon, 2022), epistemic violence (Spivak, 1998, p. 281), subtractive teacher practices, and subversive allyships. The retrieval of silenced stories holds important pedagogical and epistemological implications and counters the marked absence of narratives from immigrant children's schooling experiences (Alemán & Alemán, 2010; hooks, 2014). A critical reading and understanding of these stories allows educators to identify, disrupt, and resist discriminatory practices, including structural forms of epistemic and psychological violence enacted on immigrant children.

## **Researcher Positionality**

Engaging in this research was not just an academic responsibility, but a moral imperative for me as a racialized woman and mother deeply connected to the experiences shared by the mothers interviewed as part of this study. I am convinced that acknowledging one's positionality should be more than a mechanism to alleviate guilt of those historically accused of power abuses in research contexts, or as rites of passage for those historically excluded from research circles. As a racialized woman, I often face expectations to define my position, and when such expectations are absent, choosing not to define it is a form of resistance for me. Yet, this research marked a departure. It was an opportunity to highlight the voices of women—mothers—the ever-present absences in the narratives

surrounding immigrant students' schooling experiences, a connection I deeply relate to through shared stories with my own daughter about her schooling experiences in Canada.

Every aspect of this research, from the design of the study to the deconstruction of the stories, was influenced by my positionality as a racialized woman, an Iranian migrant, and a mother. The journey was marked by joy, remembrance, and grief as I revisited each child's story as told by their mother, reminding me that this research is an extension of my being and lived experience. The aim of this study was not only to document these narratives but also to remind immigrant mothers of their critical role, value the knowledge they carry with care, and set in motion a ripple effect leading to constructive changes in curriculum building, teacher preparation programs, and strengthening community connections. In claiming my positionality, I aim to confront epistemic harms faced by immigrant students and their mothers by showing that I too have "skin in the game" as an important mitigator of fragility (Taleb, 2014) in the context of educational equalities.

### **Theoretical and Methodological Grounding**

The theoretical frameworks grounding this study are critical race theory (CRT) (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023) and decolonial education (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2009; Dei, 2012), highlighting the experiences of non-White students, with a particular focus on the racialization and essentialization of Muslim immigrant children. A CRT framework offers a more intricate engagement with the narratives of immigrant children, as communicated through their mothers, while recognizing individual, systemic, and structural expressions of racism and exclusion. Storytelling, as advocated by CRT scholars, emerges as a potent instrument to make sense of and act upon the experiences of marginalized people while also revealing subtle and overt forms of racism (Housee, 2012). This study documents complex narratives as the primary method of reflecting the lived experiences of K–5 immigrant children in Canadian educational settings. These narratives, rich with personal anecdotes and multilayered perceptions, are both individual and collective testimonies that embody the complexity of children's day-to-day schooling experiences.

The decolonial lens perceives colonization as both a process and set of practices that lead to psychological, physical, and cultural scars (Anzaldúa & Keating, 2009; Dei, 2012). Applying a theoretical framework informed by decolonizing perspectives to guide this research allows for the contextualization of the experiences of immigrant children

by questioning institutionalized power and privilege (Dei, 2012; Dei & Zine, 2000), as conveyed through the children's stories and lived experiences (Tuck & Yang, 2018; Portelli & McMahon, 2012).

Embarking on the exploration of narratives shared by immigrant children with their mothers about their experiences within the Canadian education system, these narratives, rather than being seen as mere "data" or objective facts, are perceived as intricate tapestries of lived experiences, embodied knowledge, and shared understanding. As a study grounded in anti-racist and decolonial pedagogies, the research honours storytelling to tackle the layered marginalization, racialization, social exclusion, and identity formation in students' post-migration schooling experiences.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

For the purposes of this study, the shared stories between mother and child became central to the research, offering a unique lens into the immigrant experiences and its myriad complexities. A total of 10 Muslim-identifying mothers were engaged in 60–90 minute semi-structured interviews conducted in English. The semi-structured format was carefully chosen to provide a balance between ensuring the consistency of shared narratives while allowing sufficient flexibility for participants to express themselves in their own words and share the stories of their children. The mothers being interviewed were required to have a child attending a kindergarten to fifth grade in a school in Toronto and to have migrated to Canada three to 10 years prior to the study. Sociodemographic information was collected at the start of each interview.

### **Interviews**

Participants were offered options regarding the location of the interview, including meeting online via Zoom or meeting at a University of Toronto office. However, most participants preferred conference rooms within their housing units across Toronto, indicating perhaps a level of comfort and convenience which may have contributed positively to the openness of their responses. The conference rooms were reserved prior to each inter-



view and without children present throughout the interview process. Each interview was audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed for thorough thematic analysis. Thematic analysis enables the identification of common themes from the interviews, reflecting the stories shared by the children through their mothers (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This process underlines the study's intention to reveal the collective experiences that resonate with the narratives, displaying a qualitative picture of the studied phenomenon.

## Analysis

Building upon the thematic analysis approach, the study utilized coding to interpret emergent themes and responses to research objectives, with the narratives being analyzed after establishing a thematic coding system (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The process began with a thorough review of all transcripts, during which emerging themes were identified in an inclusive manner. The examination of emergent themes allowed for a refining of themes, identifying more nuanced parts of the narratives that address the study's focus. This stage contributed to the extraction of more detailed and specific insights from the raw narratives.

**Table 1**

*Research Participants*

Pseudonym	Country of birth	Education	Child/Age	Arrival in Canada
Aayah	Pakistan	PhD Candidate	Daughter (6)	2015
Leila	Egypt	PhD Student	Daughter (8)	2015
Rana	Sudan	Chemical Engineer	Son (7)	2019
Saba	Bangladesh	PhD Student	Son (6)	2018
Samin	Egypt	PhD Student	Daughter (8)	2013
Hana	Saudi Arabia	BA Finance	Daughter (6)	2017
Zoya	Pakistan	Masters in Psychology	Daughter (7)	2014
Noora	Oman	Computer Science Engineer	Daughter (8)	2015
Ayla	Turkey	Kindergarten Teacher	Son (8)	2019
Hala	Lebanon	MA Education	Son (9)	2019

## **Study Findings**

The study findings offer an intimate look at the nuanced and complex schooling experiences of K–5 immigrant students by making space for their narratives. Five themes emerged through the analysis of the stories shared by the children's mothers: (1) subtractive teacher practices and transference of negative attitudes toward students with Muslim-identifying families; (2) subversive allyship in support of immigrant families seeking assistance for their children; (3) racialization and the politics of race talks; (4) experiences of marginalization and bullying; and (5) identity—religion, culture, care.

### **Theme 1: Subtractive Teaching and the Transference of Negative Attitudes**

The first theme, “subtractive teaching and the transference of negative attitudes,” is grounded in Valenzuela's (1999) notion of subtractive schooling, which outlines how teachers' actions can devalue students' culture and language, leading to erosion of their social and cultural capital. This study reveals recurring incidents of teachers conveying negative attitudes toward students and their Muslim-identifying mothers in Toronto.

A direct account from Leila highlights the anguish and discomfort that characterized her eight-year-old daughter's early school experience. Recounting the incidents, Leila said,

I remember that when she was in kindergarten, she went back home and she was crying, and she didn't want to go again. So I was asking her because she was excited about going there. And she said, “I don't like the teacher.”

Leila further elaborated,

Surprisingly, I received emails from the teacher saying that I don't think my daughter is doing well. I think she's crying a lot. And he kept complaining about her behaviour since the very beginning. And it's not a naughty behaviour, or she's not listening. She's crying. And it's something that she can't control. If she feels that she's gonna cry. She's a kid. So I didn't know how to exactly direct her at this point. Like, if you feel sad, please don't cry?

Leila noted, “we were lucky that he was transferred to another school. So she only spent with him a couple of months. And then the other teacher was really, you know, understanding and [my daughter] wasn’t crying anymore.” Leila is unsure whether the first teacher’s attitude toward her daughter was impacted by the fact that the mother wears hijab, as she had noticed that “he wasn’t very friendly to me...[and] he didn’t behave well with [my daughter] at all.” The change in her daughter’s behaviour with a new, more understanding teacher raises critical questions about the dynamics in the classroom, potential bias, and their impact on the children’s educational journey.

Several of the participants stated that although they did not encounter overt racist behaviour, they did face expressions of microaggressions from parents and school employees, including teachers. In one incident, one of the mothers was asked, “Do you feel like it’s safe for you to wear these types of clothes?” in reference to a long dress worn by some Muslim women. Other mothers who wore hijab claimed that they would get “a vibe” from some teachers when they went to pick up their children. Rana, who has a seven-year-old son attending an elementary school in Toronto, explains, “it’s just the feeling...I did not encounter like obvious racist behaviour, but I feel sometimes when some people behave impolitely or something, [it’s] because of what I look like.” Another mother, Saba, noticed her six-year-old son’s growing disinterest in participating in online learning during the pandemic. The mother felt that “sometimes...when he’s raising his hand to answer the question, [the teacher] is kind of [ignoring] him. So he was becoming demotivated.”

## Theme 2: Subversive Allyship in Support of Immigrant Families

Allyship can be defined as a relationship-building initiative where privileged members of non-marginalized groups offer support to marginalized members of a community in defiance of systems of oppression (Ashburn-Nardo, 2018; Ostrove & Brown, 2018). While allyship can be exercised performatively (Kalina, 2020), it can also be evoked in a subversive manner. The etymology of subversion in Latin is *sub* (under) and *vertere* (to turn around/redirect from underneath) (Portelli & Eizadirad, 2018). In engaging with issues pertaining to power relations in social, political, and educational spaces, effective subversion can lead to substantially positive outcomes.

An instance of subversive allyship can be found in the experience of Aayah, who recalls how the principal at her daughter’s school refused to offer any support to her developmentally delayed child. Aayah recalls how a retired White teacher offered her admi-

nistrative knowledge as a way of subverting a system that is failing in its obligations to assist parents who have children with disability. Aayah detailed this, stating,

But we met that lady and she was actually [a] retired teacher. So she had a great experience with dealing with the school administration and she is the person who is actually always ready to fight with the system, [which] is not helping the parents who are in need. Like us. She helped us a lot. She actually told us that how to deal with the school. How to contact the school. Because she tell us all the rules in written, Ontario gives the parents all the rights but there's a huge gap between what is written and what is actually practiced in the school. So after all this analysis, my observation is that the principal is not very, she's not very good. She is not every time willing to help parents. Every time she want parents to be more uninformed, unconsent, or the things. She does not want them to know about their rights. So if you know your rights, you can ask and then the principal will be very different. But if you don't know anything, then the principal's attitude is like, she cannot help, school is already very burdened, government is not giving any incentive, and school funding is cutting off.

Aayah went on to recount her encounter with the administration, where she employed strategic tactics such as keeping records of communication for future references. Her story unfolded, as she pointed out,

But we fight almost 5–6 months through emails and through different stuff. And we avoid to contact them through phones because we want everything in writing. So we contact principal, even the school board, special board administrators, education ministers. We wrote emails. When we emailed principal, first time, we emailed no one. But when we received email from principal and she was not, even she was very reluctant to help us. Then we involved everyone in the email, we cc'd everyone and then principal attitude becomes suddenly changed.

The struggle, however, did not end there for Aayah. Despite multiple requests for a special education plan and assistance for her daughter, Aayah's daughter received support for only three weeks, which was terminated without the knowledge of the parents. Aayah

reveals the only reason she found out her daughter was no longer receiving assistance was because the child had stopped talking about the support teacher.

### **Theme 3: Racialization and the Politics of Race Talks**

Navigating the discourse around race and racialization in K–5 classrooms raises important questions that warrant further exploration. The majority of the interviewed mothers observed the emergence of racial consciousness in their children around the age of six. Aayah noted how her six-year-old daughter names different skin colours, except one: “She has never mentioned White.” Similarly, Leila shared a story highlighting her daughter’s unconscious racial categorization. During a bus ride, the eight-year-old began naming different people around her: “There are two coloured skin people or three, I don’t remember the number, like there’s number of people who are Asian. And there’s like three people who are, she didn’t say White and said you know, normal.”

Rana, originally from Sudan, shared that her seven-year-old son often makes statements like, “I feel different,” routinely asking why his skin is not White. Even at home, he would ask why his skin is darker, like his father’s, and not closer to his mother’s lighter complexion. As Rana recounts,

He always notices the difference in colour. In home, my husband has darker skin than me. So he’s like, more like my husband. He has darker skin. So he’s always like, why am I not like you? Also my other kid...also has like, lighter colour. So that’s why and because she was born here. She’s Canadian so he says she’s Canadian, that’s why she has lighter colour, and he always says “I’m not Canadian. Why am I not Canadian?” He asks such questions.

The perception of Canadian identity, as perceived by Rana’s son, further complicates matters as he developed an understanding that only “Canadians are White,” and if you are a Canadian, then “you are not Muslim.” When Rana communicated these concerns with her son’s teacher, she was reassured that there will be conversations on the topic in class but also, “Toronto is a multinational and multicultural city, so you don’t need to worry about that.” Rana, however, continues to have cause for concern as she recalls an incident over the summer where she was applying baby powder on her son’s body to prevent excessive perspiration: “He told me, put some more and I said why, and he said because I will look White.”

The question of Canadian identity tied to Whiteness is not unique to Rana's experience. Zoya also grappled with her seven-year-old daughter's understanding of being "*Canadian Canadian*." In Zoya's words,

She's like that person or she or he or whatever is Canadian Canadian. I'm like...what is Canadian? So she would describe like, you know she wouldn't say White 'cause she doesn't know the race yet. She would describe her teacher...[who] fits the description of Canadian. But she's German and she is like vocal about it that I'm from Germany. And she shared in class like oh I'm from Germany and I'm like...see, she's from Germany, not from Canada. Canadians can be anyone if they're born here or whatever so that makes you Canadian, but yeah that's just hard to believe for her.

Addressing these complexities about identity and race can be challenging, especially when children focus on visible distinctions like skin colour. Furthering this point, Zoya stated,

White people don't have something defined, like you know, so me I have a hijab. For them, they have coloured skin. They are Asian and this, like, White people are the rest. There's like, there's no tag for them. There's no special tag, she can't describe them.

#### **Theme 4: Experiences of Marginalization and Bullying**

Exploring young immigrant children's experiences of marginalization and bullying can offer insights into the complexities of students' sense of belonging. Hana recounts a difficult incident involving her six-year-old daughter. Her daughter was extremely upset when she came home from school one day and, despite Hana's pleas, she kept silent about what bothered her. Eventually, her daughter chose to share her troubling experience—a classmate had told her that women who look like her mom (i.e., women who wear hijab), kill people:

I tried to talk to her because she was about to [fall] sleep and she was so upset. And I said, you know it's not true. You see mommy...that she never hurts anybody? I always tell you...we cannot hurt someone. Anything...even like a plant or an ant.

Despite Hana's attempts to reassure her, the young girl posed a question that left Hana shaken. "Why did you kill a cockroach?" the child inquired, and Hana's only response was, "Because they scar[e] me!"

Zoya expressed concern about the normalization of violence and how her son had told her that "it's normal to get bullied." It was, however, crucial for her son to have his mother speak to the teacher, as if to seek the teacher's protection. Zoya recalls,

Sometimes he had some encounters, like last year there were other students in their class were bullying almost all people, not just him, but he took it personally. So he asked me to go to school and talk to the teacher."

The mere possibility that the teacher might intervene, even if to reprimand the bullying student, made the young boy feel secure. Samin, another mother, describes an experience with a non-White parent-child duo who would bully other students, particularly Muslim and Jewish children. The situation escalated to the point where police were called in when the bullying father threatened Samin's child physically. Despite the fear instilled in Samin and her child, the police only issued a warning to the offending parent. Samin, expressing her deep concern, shares,

Now the father and son think they can do whatever they want without consequences. My son did not even come tell me about another time that he was told to go back to his country. The teacher told me. My son said he was scared that the man might do something to you or baba if he told. We might go the police again, and then the man would hurt us. So he didn't even tell us.

In the interviews, it was pointed out that direct conversations about discrimination and racism typically arose in the wake of violent incidents, such as the 2021 attack in London, Ontario, where a Muslim family was murdered. Rana states that after the issue was addressed in school, her child "came home with questions. So we started this conversation. Why do people hate some people and not accept them all."

## **Theme 5: Identity—Religion, Culture, Care**

The participants highlighted the positive impact of their religious and cultural identities being meaningfully acknowledged in classrooms. Several of the participants recalled their children's joy when they felt included in the schooling process. For instance, during the month of Ramadan, some of the families received notices from teachers that if they want other kids to know about the Muslim holy month, the teacher can raise the topic in class. Rana recalls a heartening moment when her son came home, radiating happiness, and announced, "all my classmates now know about Ramadan." Certain classrooms also recognized different festivals and holy days like Eid, contributing to a sense of welcome and belonging among students.

Despite these positive experiences, conversations centring identity are often quite complex, particularly when addressing their children's questions about visible religious symbols like hijab. Zoya recounts her daughter asking, "why are you wearing hijab mama, other women aren't wearing it." On other occasions, Zoya's daughter would wear a scarf and proudly declare "look mommy, I'm like you. I am a Muslim." During one of their conversations, Zoya explained to her daughter,

We're all different. Some Muslims, they wear hijab, some of them don't.  
Later, when you get older, you can wear it if you want, or you can not wear it. And she said I want to be like you. And I said you can be yourself, you can be better than mommy.

Leila's daughter had a meaningful understanding of her hyphenated identity at a young age, especially after receiving their Canadian citizenship. Leila reflected on her daughter's growing awareness of her cultural identities and response to the question of "where are you from":

I've asked her this many times, especially that she was aware that because she wasn't born here. She wasn't Canadian. So she was aware that she's Egyptian. And then after we got the citizenship, she was oh, I think she was around seven years old or six-and-a-half, something like this. So she was aware. So when I was talking to her about the Canadian citizenship ceremony, even if it's a virtual ceremony, we got the Canada flag behind us. And she was telling stories to her friends that now I'm Canadian, but I'm Egyptian Canadian because I was Egyptian first.



Maintaining this hyphenated identity is further exemplified in Leila's children's strong ties with Egypt, which are nurtured by frequent family visits. Yet, an emotional attachment to Canada and their daily lives here is equally prominent. Leila elucidates this intricate balance:

They are still very connected to Egypt. We take them every year, and they think of it as a vacation. In Egypt for them, everything is possible, they can do anything they want, everything is okay, they can eat whatever they want. So they have very good memories. It's very fun for them. But at the same time, if you ask them if they want to stay or come back, they say they want to come back to their school in Canada. So they are attached somehow to Canada and Canadian society as well. At the same they keep asking to go to Egypt every year, to spend summers there.

For Samin's daughter, the question of "where are you from" would garner a different response. Samin maintains her eight-year-old daughter would never say she is Canadian, even though she was born in Canada, "because she knows that when people ask this question, they mean where are you originally from."

As the mothers recounted experiences of care and joy, many emphasized the importance of community-building and being part of a close-knit circle of friends as paramount to their children's sense of happiness. The change in students' overall positive perception of school upon finding friendship is palpable in Aayah's words, who states her daughter "shares sometimes what happened with the school, because she found a very good friend." Similarly, Samin noted a considerable difference when her daughter attended summer camp or when she was assigned to a new class and did not have any friends: "I was very lonely, I stay by myself," Samin's daughter shared with her mother. In the presence of her friends, Samin's daughter would peel away her generally shy and quiet demeanor on display at school and show "her real self," where she is "not very quiet and shy at home. But outside yes, but once she's familiar with a kid she's okay, then she shows her real person, so shy is the first layer, or temporary."

In Rana's experience, her son's self-expression as a Muslim improved significantly after he found a "supportive friend, he was able to talk about his identity as a Muslim." She remembers,

Last year he had also Muslim kids in his class. So he was telling me that they have this conversation during Christmas time, especially. Because other kids, they say that about Jesus, and this is the Son of God. And he said, me and my friend, we said, "No, we don't believe in that." So I feel like he had this supportive friend, he was able to talk about his identity as a Muslim.

Reflecting on her daughter's social interactions and their relation to her identity formation, Zoya noted how after her daughter formed new friendships with other Pakistani students, she began to speak in Urdu; an indication that "they are just like acknowledging their culture, acknowledging their background, where they belong, or where they come from." Zoya also found that her daughter "is really proud of the fact that there is someone in her class who shares the same cultures, shares the same language, and interestingly she only talks in Urdu with her grandparents, she doesn't even talk in Urdu with me."

Moreover, the teachers' positive attitudes and support offers important spaces for allyship for marginalized students. Samin recalls an interaction between her kindergarten-age son and his teacher,

My youngest son, he went to pre-school but wasn't speaking English yet, only Arabic. The teacher still encouraged him to speak. First he was speaking in Arabic [with the] teachers because he loves to talk. The teacher would write down what he said and ask me what it meant at the end of the day.

Representation also played a significant role in helping the children express their identities. Zoya noticed the positive impact of having her daughter's culture and religion reflected in "the library books or the books that are being given out in class" and for the young girl to bring books home that "include people like her." Zoya asserts that even though she does not talk to her daughter about religion, the young girl would come home excited about the prospects of borrowing books on Islam and Muslim women who "accomplished big things." On one occasion, her daughter said "there was such a nice book of our Islam I wanted to get." The children "feel special that they're being talked about, that their culture is being celebrated," Zoya noted. These narratives emphasize the value of validating and affirming children's religious, cultural, and personal identities within the school setting.

## Discussions and Recommendations

In Canada, the impact of schooling on the social inclusion of immigrant students has highlighted the urgency of addressing issues pertaining to students' perceptions of inclusion and belonging, linguistic needs, racialization, exclusion, prejudice, minimal participation in school activities, and lack of access to resources (Anisef et al., 2010; Brewer & McCabe, 2014; Feuerverger & Richards, 2007; Krahn & Taylor, 2005; Selimos & Daniel, 2017; Villegas & Brady, 2019; Walsh et al., 2011; Wilkinson et al., 2012). Although schools' role in the social inclusion of immigrant students is critical (Brewer & McCabe, 2014; Devine, 2013; LeVasseur, 2008), understanding power dynamics and complexities influencing the post-migration schooling experiences of children can offer important insights. This understanding is foundational to integrating decolonizing practices, which involves actively questioning and challenging the educational system's colonial structures and narratives. It necessitates recognizing and valuing the diverse knowledges and experiences that immigrant children and their families bring to the classroom and fostering spaces that support the development of their multiple identities.

Following Adair's (2015) guidelines on addressing discrimination in schools and based on the findings from the study, recommendations are offered in four domains to mitigate the post-migration schooling challenges of children. These recommendations offer strategies for educators and administrators to recognize vulnerabilities, emphasize strengths, and foster a sense of belonging for immigrant children in classrooms: (1) targeted teacher development programs, (2) engage, empower, and support immigrant families, (3) create spaces for solidarity-building and epistemic communities, and (4) initiate critical conversations on care, belonging, race, and religious values with families, students, and school staff.

For teachers and educational support staff to understand the positive or harmful impacts of their actions on immigrant children, it is imperative to create targeted professional development that is inclusive and focuses on respecting different cultures and beliefs grounded in compassionate accommodation, rather than from a savior-complex position. Teacher training programs need to be intentional in bringing in inclusive pedagogical practices to address the cultural and epistemic diversity in Canadian classrooms (Amjad, 2012; Ellis et al., 2011; Sleeter & Stillman, 2005). Additionally, it is vital to incorporate anti-racism education for teachers, students, and their families. Inviting

students into difficult conversations can be facilitated by sharing relevant, age-appropriate books and inviting guest speakers to critically engage the children in discussions on race, racialization, and violence. Children exposed to discussions of violence may suffer emotional and psychological distress if enough context is not provided to understand the underlying causes for such acts, as in the case of the classroom conversation about the London attack. Educators can involve parents and community members when addressing challenging topics such as hate crimes and extreme violence to avoid unnecessary stressors by creating a safe space for children to broach difficult discussions. In the process of creating a safe space for children to engage in difficult discussions, it is essential to simultaneously acknowledge the historical and ongoing impacts of colonization on marginalized communities, as this is integral to addressing the interconnectedness of different forms of oppression.

All interviewed mothers reported active involvement in their children's education at home. Therefore, it is fundamental for teachers to understand that immigrant families' perceived disengagement does not stem from a lack of interest, but can instead be attributed to structural and institutional barriers that can be mitigated by creating spaces for families and educators to connect and communicate. Parents of immigrant children often find themselves powerless and at a disadvantage to influence change in schools (Pérez Carreón et al., 2005), especially considering that structures and norms have already been established in school settings. To remedy this problem, Sobel and Kugler (2007) note that some schools have adopted strategies to engage the families of immigrant students, including hiring family-school liaisons from within immigrant communities. To actively dismantle structural and institutional barriers by questioning and challenging the underlying assumptions and power dynamics that perpetuate them also requires a more explicit naming of how educational systems may be complicit in reinforcing colonial narratives and structures, and actively working to create more inclusive and equitable spaces.

Creating welcoming spaces to encourage immigrant families, particularly mothers, to become actively engaged in their children's schooling is another important consideration. To accomplish this, it is necessary to inform immigrant families of school policies as well as educational programs and practices in accessible language. To avoid complicating the relationship between immigrant children and their families, it is essential to create spaces for dialogue involving families, teachers, and support staff, as well as community organizations that offer support to immigrant families. These community

organizations often have an insider knowledge of some of the concerns raised by families and can offer support and help advance a more nuanced understanding of students' needs. A decolonizing approach would involve recognizing and valuing the knowledges and experiences that immigrant families bring to these conversations and actively seeking to create spaces that support them.

With reductive representation of Muslim students' schooling experiences and discussion on violence, pain, and trauma, experiences of community-building and joy are often overlooked (Saleh, 2021). Hence, there is a need to move toward epistemic communities where immigrant students' families and educators can "congregate around certain themes, concepts, disciplines or methods, creating 'discursive spaces' characterized by intensive cross-referencing" (Levy et al., 2020, p. 2). To encourage critical dialogue and open up the possibilities for building new relations, it is vital to find ways to connect to the families of immigrant students through family socials. The othering and experiences of marginalization immigrant children encounter find their way back home when families are unable to communicate their children's needs or feel ostracized, particularly Muslim women who already experience discrimination in society (Akram, 2018).

Epistemic communities need to be created in spaces that centre healing. Creating epistemic communities requires acknowledging immigrant students' multiple belongings and identities and their impact on the students' well-being (Berry & Hou, 2016). To construct spaces of *care* that encourage solidarity and allyship, Cui (2019) argues for acknowledging students and their families' histories and lived knowledges:

Some dominant knowledge constructions in Canadian public schools...not only devalue the indigenous knowledges brought by immigrant youth into the classroom, but also reproduce anti-immigrant discourses and reinforce racial hierarchies. In this context, these students suffer the consequences of negative identity construction and have difficulty negotiating a sense of belonging in Canada. (p. 67)

This study's findings echo Cameron et al.'s (2003) assertions that between the ages of seven and nine, "children show a qualitatively different understanding of person traits, shifting from primarily physical and concrete, to internal and psychological" (p. 124). It is therefore essential to engage this age group in conversations on race and racialization as they begin to "assign value and judgment to themselves and others" (Ramarajan & Ru-

nell, 2007, p. 91). This engagement will contribute to developing a critical understanding of racial, ethnic, and religious differences. The constructing, experience, and interpretation of ethnic and racial identities have been identified as important to children's development (Coll & Marks, 2009).

Immigrant children's engagement with their ethnic and racial identities is impacted by their perceived level of acceptance by their peers and the dominant social structure, which often determines the terms of participation for the minoritized students and controls who is included and excluded (Berry, 2006). Immigrant children who are "differently valued" at schools find themselves needing to prove their right to belong and their stranger identity normalized, often in disparate, polarizing settings (Devine, 2013). For children struggling to reconcile Canadianness and being racialized, like Samin's daughter, it is vital for educators to apply a pedagogy of care when addressing immigrant students' identity negotiations. Muslim children, like other immigrant groups, hold multiple, often splintered identities, and if their differences and intersectional identities are not acknowledged in a caring and supportive manner, it can lead to identity crises and affective frustrations. The existence of such spaces of care is critical, considering Amjad's (2018) findings stressing Canadian Muslim students' perceptions of their teachers as ineffective or reluctant in addressing Islamophobia and anti-Muslim racism.

Conversations that centre care, belonging, and religious values need to be grounded in a mutual feeling of understanding, respect, and compassionate care. These conversations can start by acknowledging the intergenerational practices and rituals of care and solidarity immigrant students and their families practice in their communities. This process requires teachers to distance themselves from a deficit mentality, navigate sensitive cultural and religious issues with utmost care, and speak from a place of compassion and knowledge when discussing topics that are outside their own experiences and those of the majority of the students. Educators can interact with the families to learn about their culture, heritage, and religious and spiritual beliefs (Dryden-Peterson, 2015; Flaitz, 2006), incorporating this knowledge into the curriculum and classroom activities.

The narratives shared by immigrant children's mothers offer a complex view of schooling and education which provides a platform to validate these unique experiences by foregrounding the stories of children at the K–5 level. In a departure from single-factor paradigms to decode why immigrant students continue to experience exclusion and discrimination in educational settings that reproduce anti-immigrant discourses and

reinforce racial hierarchies, educators need to return to basics: build solidarities, centre compassion, and construct new epistemic communities grounded in social justice and the practice of collaborative knowledge-building.

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