



From Exclusion to Expression: How Creative Expression Supports Refugee Youth in Canada

Sofia Noori

Research brief prepared by Marjorie Rugunda



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Key Ideas

- Many refugee youth in Canada face racism and bullying in schools. These forms of exclusion build up over time and leave youth feeling emotionally disconnected and uncertain of who they are.
- Storytelling, music, and self-reflection practices can create spaces where refugee youth piece together their past and present situations to feel more supported and included.
- Higher education opens space for creative expression and self-exploration. Colleges and universities offer refugee youth outlets that support personal, community, and artistic growth.

Recommendations

- **Incorporate refugee voices in policy development.** Youth with experiences being refugees can and should help shape the programs and policies that affect them, especially in education.
- **Offer comprehensive mental and emotional well-being programs for refugee youth.** In addition to therapy, other forms of healing that encourage reflection, creativity, and identity exploration should be accessible.
- **Equip educators with additional teaching support and training that focus on the needs and useful teaching practices to best support refugee youth and newcomers.**

Refugee youth's stories show how having outlets to express themselves not only helps them heal—it also contributes to a more welcoming and inclusive Canada.

Canada is a global leader for refugee resettlement, welcoming thousands of youth each year from situations like war and persecution. In Canada, refugee newcomers are generally guaranteed housing, education, and legal status. However, emotional and cultural support during resettlement is less accessible—especially for young people navigating school systems that don't always recognize their histories, languages, or complex identities.

Dr. Sofia Noori, CMS Affiliate and Assistant Professor in the Department of Curriculum and Pedagogy, looks beyond policy checklists to ask: what does it mean to truly feel at home in a new country? Through their own storytelling, refugee youth document their experiences in Canadian secondary schools and transitions into university. These self-narrated stories offer powerful insights into the daily experiences and frustrations of refugee youth, demonstrating how storytelling, music, theatre, and digital media, can connect refugee youth with themselves and other Canadian communities. Noori finds that, at times, societal pressures and past experiences push refugee youth to suppress parts of their identities. At other times, creative outlets, supportive friends and family, and post-secondary programs encourage these young people toward healing, confidence, and a fuller sense of self. Overall, refugee youth's stories show how having outlets to express themselves not only helps them heal—it also contributes to a more welcoming and inclusive Canada.

Key Findings

Schooling: Spaces of (Un)Welcome

For many refugee youth in Canada, public schools are often the first places where they begin to feel out of place. Instead of feeling welcomed, they are frequently reminded that they are different—whether through mispronounced names, teasing about accents, or teachers who don't understand their cultures or heritage. Over time, these moments can wear away at these newcomers' confidence and sense of self.

Many youth feel pressure to hide important parts of themselves like their language, clothing, or cultural beliefs to fit in. Peer pressure, school policies, and misunderstandings from teachers and classmates force young people to minimize or abandon parts of how they see themselves to avoid standing out. For example, Kim Thúy, a refugee from Vietnam, described how teachers in her classroom questioned her—and other Vietnamese children—about what they ate for breakfast. Though their responses were consistent (soup, rice, vermicelli), the teachers didn't believe them and called their parents to verify. Thúy eventually stopped eating traditional Vietnamese breakfasts altogether, even as an adult. Small, repeated moments of doubt or cultural misunderstanding in school can lead refugee youth to abandon meaningful aspects of themselves just to avoid feeling excluded.

Navigating Healing and Expression

The emotional disruption caused by racism, bullying and exclusionary actions in Canadian secondary schools forces many refugee youth to limit how they express and understand themselves. In response, many young people begin to process painful experiences, question cultural practices pushed on them, and reconnect with different parts of themselves. Practices like writing, music, digital storytelling, and theatre can help refugee youth find ways to make sense of who they are.

For example, Carmen Aguirre, a Chilean refugee who resettled in British Columbia, describes in her memoir how she felt invisible in both her homeland and her adopted country. Through theatre, writing stories, and later, therapy, she began to make sense of her multiple identities and later used it as fuel for artistic and political expression. Rather than choosing between being Canadian and holding onto one's culture of origin, many refugee youth use creative outlets to help them weave together multiple influences—old and new, personal and cultural—to support their healing and self-expression.

Universities: Spaces of Expression

While racism and discrimination in secondary school leave many refugee youth feeling hidden, higher education institutions tend to offer more support. With access to a broader range of courses, clubs, and artistic programs,

many youth find opportunities to explore their identities and interests in ways they had not been able to before. In fact, refugee youth describe colleges and universities as spaces for more authentic self-exploration.

Mozhdah Jamalzadah, who immigrated to Canada as a child refugee from Afghanistan, initially studied Political Science at the University of British Columbia before turning to journalism and music. Her artistic work became a way to reflect on her experiences and speak to broader issues of gender and displacement. Mozhdah's story and others' show how post-secondary institutions' diverse courses and creative spaces can provide refugee youth with the support systems, new connections, and programs to express themselves even many years after resettling to Canada.

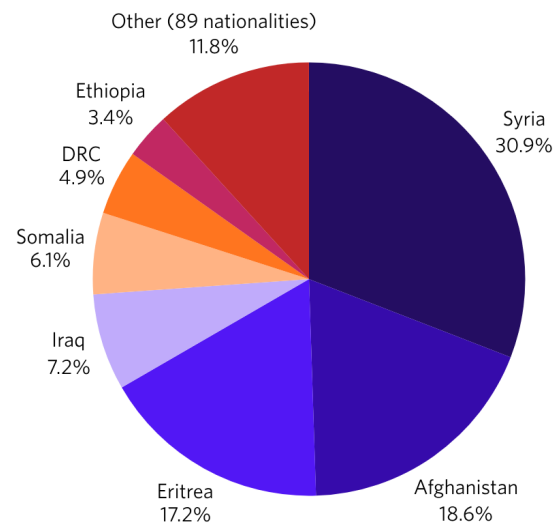


Figure 1. Refugees Resettled in Canada by Nationality (January 2015 - March 2025)

Methods

Dr. Sofia Noori analysed autobiographical stories that refugee youth published to explore how refugee youth understand themselves and their relation to others in Canada. She selected a range of autobiographical materials, like published memoirs and video blogs, created by individuals with lived refugee experiences who arrived in Canada during adolescence. These sources were chosen for their focus on personal reflection and cultural expression during the resettlement period.

Conclusion

Refugee youth face many challenges upon arriving in Canada. Among these challenges are navigating school, friends, and attempts to fit in while settling into a new country. From racism to pressure to hide their language or culture, many young refugees feel a deep sense of loss or disconnection when they enter secondary schools.

However, when young people's educational institutions offer creative outlets like music, writing, or theatre, youth are able to process their lived experiences. Access to such programs and support can help them move from feeling like they need to hide themselves to understanding themselves and their new life in Canada. To make this possible, secondary schools and broader education policies should create spaces that don't just focus on academic achievement, but also support creativity and well-being for young refugees in Canada.

References

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About the Authors

Sofia Noori is an Assistant Professor at UBC's Faculty of Education, Department of Curriculum and Pedagogy. Her research and writing focuses on how refugee youth navigate schooling systems in Canada, in the aftermath of living in civil unrest or war, migration, transitory states, refugee camps, and resettlement. She works with educators from across the country to develop resources, materials, and strategies to help meet the academic and psychosocial needs of newcomer students from war zones.

Marjorie Rugunda is a PhD student in the department of Gender, Race, Sexuality and Social Justice at the University of British Columbia. She holds a BA degree from Rhodes University, South Africa and a Master's degree from the University of Calgary. Her current research studies how institutions within Africa reinforce colonial legacies that shape contemporary social and political relations in (post)colonial contexts.



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