

Integration and Participation of Newcomer Youth in Society

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The Bahá'í community of Canada is a religious community dedicated to promoting the betterment of society. Working with thousands of youth of all ages and backgrounds to develop their talents and capacities is a central feature of our efforts to further this aim. Our experience is yielding insights into the participation of newcomer youth in Canadian society, and this paper represents an initial effort to discuss some of these insights as a contribution to the broader discourse on the role of youth in society.

The period of youth is a critical time in the life of an individual, during which one is undergoing tremendous change and taking on more responsibility. Many youth in Canada experience this stage of life as newcomers to this country.¹ Young newcomers, in addition to the challenges faced by other youth, have the added task of learning the ways of a new country and culture. Individual Canadians, communities and social institutions have responsibilities to support the efforts of these youth to integrate into and participate in Canadian society. By “integration” we mean more than learning the ins and outs of Canadian culture and obtaining employment, although these are undoubtedly important. Some other aspects of integration are the ability to form meaningful friendships with one’s peers, strengthen relationships with the members of one’s extended family, and contribute meaningfully to one’s community.

Canada has a long tradition of welcoming newcomers. Despite what we have learned as a country, immigrants and newcomer youth face particular challenges with the process of integrating and participating fully in the life of

¹ According to Statistics Canada, in 2006, there were approximately 400,000 young people under the age of 24 who are newcomers to this country, the majority of whom live in Ontario.



society. These challenges do not have easy solutions; rather, they require careful thinking and analysis in light of social research and the application of relevant moral and ethical principles. This paper will explore some of the challenges faced by newcomer youth, and raise questions for discussion. This analysis is informed by the experience of the Bahá'í community of Canada with diverse groups of youth across the country, many of them newcomers, in the context of programs that seek to develop their capacity to serve their communities, and to develop their intellectual and spiritual powers.

Youth is a time of life marked by physical, emotional, and psychological change, processes that are compounded for newcomer youth. Upon moving to Canada, many encounter a radically different worldview from that to which they are accustomed. In some cases, this might mean different expectations about academic achievement, gender roles, sexuality, norms regarding how to interact with elders and authority figures, and the role of religion and spirituality in society. Many youth also face the challenge of learning a new language, and experience racism and other forms of discrimination, as well as bullying in both physical and virtual spaces. These challenges are exacerbated by the fact that many young people come to Canada after having experienced trauma in their home countries, which was brought on by war, violence, and/or economic hardship. Many newcomer youth have also been separated from their families prior to coming to Canada and need to get to know them again in a new environment.

In the best situations, the challenges that immigrant youth experience help them to develop strengths. Two characteristics of the stage of youth are resiliency and an ability to adapt to new environments. Many newcomer youth learn the language and adapt to the culture relatively quickly and help their parents to navigate life in Canada. They are thus empowered to take on unusual levels of responsibility, which often assists them in other areas of life. They also develop the ability to communicate in different languages and between cultures. Many youth learn to approach their experience of integrating into Canadian society with grace and a sense of humour, and use their experiences to assist others in similar situations.



The challenges and opportunities that newcomer youth face give rise to many questions: What are indicators of integration? Why is it important that young newcomers are able to fully participate in the life of society? What skills, habits, qualities and attitudes do young newcomers need to integrate in Canada and participate fully in the life of society, and how do they develop them? What are characteristics of welcoming communities that assist young people to integrate and participate fully in the life of society? How is capacity built in communities to welcome and learn from what its newcomers have to offer?

Family dynamics in newcomer families

One common representation of newcomer youth in the mainstream media is that of young people who experience inner conflict, with one foot in the culture of their parents and homeland, and the other in Canadian culture. This leads to the impression that they are “lost souls,” caught between “two worlds.” Their parents are portrayed as traditional, obsessed with their children succeeding academically, and antagonistic to permissive Western culture. This stereotype of newcomer youth in crisis is connected to mainstream media representations of youth in general as a group in crisis. While there is some truth to these representations, they do not give voice to the experience of youth who have more positive experiences with integration.

The fact that newcomer youth experience a different social reality from their parents is a challenge. However, this challenge does not necessarily need to lead to conflict and pain. Our experience suggests that when young people are given a space to discuss with a group of friends, in a context that invites reflection on spiritual concepts, they are able to reflect deeply on their cultural influences and identify aspects of each culture that they would like to or prefer not to adopt. They also develop the language, qualities and attitudes to have conversations with their parents about the way to approach major life decisions and the applicable principles, while respecting the rights and responsibilities of both parents and children. As youth acquire a sense of moral purpose, they exercise agency to navigate the cultural tensions and contradictions that might surround them.



Approaches to integrating young people into the life of a community appear to be most successful when they consider the family as a whole. Like youth, parents also need a space to interact and share experiences with others in similar situations. When parents feel comfortable to participate in such spaces, they are able to better understand the challenges their children face and to assist them to meet these challenges.

In many newcomer families, members of the extended family often contribute a great deal to a newcomer youth's upbringing, and provide support to both parents and youth. Thus, when young people and their parents are supported by an extended family and community, it is easier for them to communicate with each other and find solutions to the challenges of making decisions that involve different cultural values.

Some of the questions we encounter in the course of our own efforts to work with newcomer youth are: What are some of the rights and responsibilities of children? What are some of the rights and responsibilities of parents? How do families avoid the extremes of permissive parenting — allowing youth unrestricted freedom — and authoritarian parenting — allowing youth very little freedom? What role can different members of the extended family play in assisting youth to navigate life in Canada? How do newcomer families — many of whose members are working very long hours — make time to interact meaningfully? How do families build a habit of consulting together? What is the relationship between the family and the community?

Building strong friendships

The ability of a young person to build friendships is central to the process of social integration. A group of friends provides a sense of belonging that is important for young people, especially those who are coming from a different cultural context, and thus may require more support. However, for meaningful relationships to develop, a group of friends should do more than create a sense of belonging. In fact, newcomer youth often face the challenge of being offered entry into a group of friends that promises a sense of belonging, but is otherwise detrimental to them. This raises the question: What kinds of friendships are most conducive to successful integration?



Our experience with young people suggests that a young person’s potential is more likely to be released, and that they are likely to be better integrated, if they have a group of friends who are united in the goal of serving their communities. The members of such groups learn to communicate effectively and support those who are different from them, give each other courage to persevere to achieve their goals even when it is difficult, encourage each other to avoid negative patterns of behaviour, and learn to take joy in the progress of their friends.

Too often it happens that members of groups, even those that exist to serve the community, become comfortable working together, develop their own language, and have a difficult time relating to those outside of the group. The success of these groups is largely dependent on their ability to constantly reach out and welcome new youth — those who may have a different set of experiences, progress at different paces, and have different frames of reference. The questions we are asking include the following: How are service to the community and friendship related? How can youth assist their peers from all backgrounds to progress? How can youth help each other to avoid negative patterns of behaviour? How can youth encourage each other to achieve their goals? Why do groups of people have a tendency to become inward-looking? How do individuals and groups learn to be welcoming and inclusive?

The Bahá’í community of Canada collaborates with a number of people to help develop contributions to thought on issues of social concern.

This paper represents thinking that is helping to inform the work of our community to participate in Canadian public discourses. This is not a position paper or official statement from the Bahá’í community, but rather a set of reflections that draws insight from the Bahá’í teachings and the experience of the community as we seek to apply them to the betterment of society.

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