



## Article

# The Syrian Canadian Sports Club: A Community-Based Participatory Action Research Project with/for Syrian Youth Refugees

Daniel B. Robinson <sup>1,\*</sup> , Ingrid M. Robinson <sup>1</sup>, Vanessa Currie <sup>2</sup> and Nathan Hall <sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Education, St. Francis Xavier University, Antigonish, NS B2G 2W5, Canada; irobinso@stfx.ca

<sup>2</sup> International Institute for Child Rights and Development, Victoria, BC V8W 3G9, Canada; vanessa.anne.currie@gmail.com

<sup>3</sup> Faculty of Education and Faculty of Kinesiology and Applied Health, University of Winnipeg, Winnipeg, MB R3B 2E9, Canada; na.hall@uwinnipeg.ca

\* Correspondence: drobinso@stfx.ca; Tel.: +1-902-867-5569

Received: 13 March 2019; Accepted: 21 May 2019; Published: 28 May 2019



**Abstract:** In this paper, we share the rationale, process, and results related to a community-based participatory action research (PAR) project in which we, among other things, aimed to attend to the underrepresentation of newcomer youth in community sport and recreation pursuits. By way of engaging with one rural county's Syrian youth refugee population while also attending closely to a social ecological framework, we first identified obstacles and opportunities related to multiple systems (i.e., individual, social/interpersonal, organizational/community, public policy). Drawing upon multiple data sources (i.e., photos and photovoice, participants' drawings and notes, participant-researchers' field notes, and focus group interviews) to inform our subsequent plan-act-observe-reflect action research cycles, we and our Syrian youth participants co-created and implemented the Syrian Youth Sports Club. In addition to describing the rationale and process related to this Syrian Youth Sports Club, we focus herein upon the results, which primarily relate to participants' experiences becoming (physically literate) and belonging.

**Keywords:** participatory action research (PAR); refugee; youth; newcomer; physical activity; sport; recreation; social ecological; ecological systems; physical literacy

## 1. Introduction and Background

By way of developing a new national physical activity resource for newcomer youth, Canada's premier physical and health education organization, Physical and Health Education Canada, recently signaled its recognition of the importance of facilitating sport and recreation participation for all (Stanec and Bhalla 2015). Relatedly, Sport Canada has also recently identified the role sport participation plays in building community. Indeed, one of Canadian Sport Policy 2012's goals is related to sport for development (Sport Canada 2012). Such recognition is to be both expected and celebrated. That is, Canada was the first country to adopt multiculturalism as an official policy, its newcomer population is both diverse and growing (Tremblay et al. 2006), and the many benefits associated with sport and recreation are routinely recognized (Eime et al. 2013; Holt et al. 2011). Additionally, newcomer youth have been found to be less engaged in sport and recreation pursuits than their native-born peers (Tremblay et al. 2006; van Wel et al. 1996; van Wel et al. 2006). Certainly, given these observations, gaining an understanding about newcomer youth's relative (dis)engagement with these active pursuits is especially important. Indeed, if one ascribes to the belief that all youth within Canada, including those who are newcomers, would benefit from and ought to be afforded inviting opportunities for sport and recreation participation, then clearly much is still to be learned, and done.

### 1.1. Relevant Research Related to Newcomer Youth Sport and Recreation Participation

The challenges and issues that serve to limit newcomer youth participation in sport and recreation pursuits are complex, interconnected, and diverse. Evidence is plentiful suggesting low levels of engagement in sport and recreation for all newcomers (Brewer and Kimbro 2014; Singh et al. 2008), particularly when compared to the engagement of others. Numerous contextual elements may contribute to these lower levels of participation. For example, newcomer youth may live in neighborhood environments lacking suitable and/or inviting environments for such opportunities (Lichter 2013; Yen and Kaplan 1999). Moreover, immigrant “enclaves” (Portes and Rumbaut 2001), neighborhoods with high concentrations of newcomers from the same region or ethnic group, may impact sport and recreation participation in both positive and negative ways (Brewer and Kimbro 2014; Fernandez-Kelly and Schauffler 1994; Logan et al. 2002; Portes 1998). In addition to the physical environment, newcomer youth are also influenced by their social environments whereby, for example, social cohesion and parents’/guardians’ safety fears may have a negative impact upon sport and recreation participation (Kimbro and Kaul 2016). Cultural norms and religious beliefs may present additional influencers upon sport and recreation participation (Culp 2010; Robinson and Randall 2016; Stanec et al. 2016). For instance, evidence suggests some female newcomer youth who are Muslim face a greater number of hurdles than do their male peers with respect to sport and recreation participation (Dagkas et al. 2011; Robinson and Randall 2016; Stanec et al. 2016).

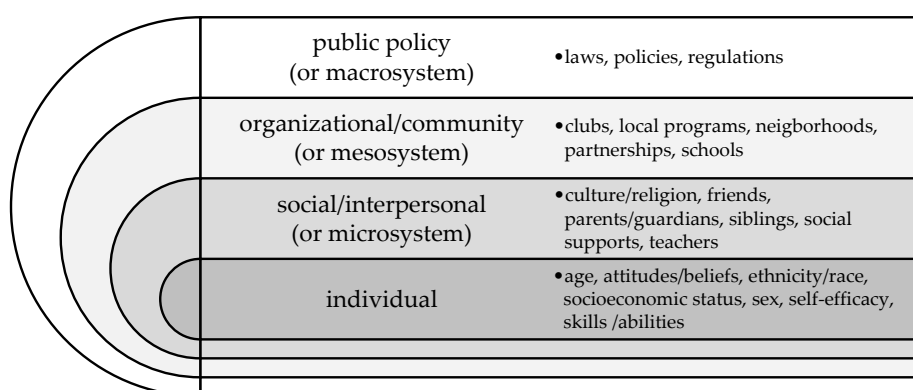
That newcomer youth in Canada (and the West) are underrepresented in sport and recreation pursuits (Dogra et al. 2010; Tremblay et al. 2006) suggests that current sport and recreation programs and places are lacking in cultural diversity, if not also in cultural responsiveness (Livingston and Tirone 2012; Robinson et al. 2013). This is not completely unexpected, as a lack of cultural diversity and/or responsiveness and the related negative effect upon participation has been reported in organizations such as Scouts Canada and the YMCA (Van Ngo 2009). This underrepresentation has many potentially undesirable consequences. For example, without adequate participation in sport and recreation, newcomer youth are less likely to develop aerobic and anaerobic fitness (Thivel et al. 2011), competency in motor skill development and performance (Loprinzi et al. 2012), and self-esteem (Erkut and Tracy 2002). They are also more likely to develop anxiety and depression (Goldfield et al. 2011; Sallis et al. 2000). In addition to these physical and emotional consequences, sport and recreation participation has the potential for some positive social and cultural outcomes for newcomers too. That is, with their engagement in sport and recreation, newcomer youth gain opportunities for social integration (Taylor and Doherty 2007), language development and cultural orientation (Doherty and Taylor 2007), a sense of belonging and inclusion (Spaaij 2015; Tirone et al. 2010), and the development of social capital for a new country (Spaaij 2012; Walseth 2008).

### 1.2. Recognizing a Need for Our Participatory Action Research (PAR) Project

Attending to these (and other) observations, opportunities, and challenges necessitates a clearer understanding of the many systems that have an impact upon newcomer youth. For example, in addition to newcomer youth attitudes and behaviors, community and social structures also enable and/or limit opportunities for sport and recreation participation. Certainly, the reciprocal interplay among individual, social/interpersonal, organizational/community, and public policy systems influence opportunities for sport and recreation participation (Strack et al. 2010). The many elements within these four systems can clearly have both positive and negative effects upon newcomers’ participation in their newfound sport and recreation places and programs (see Figure 1). For example, an individual’s sex can enable or prevent one from participating in sport or recreation. Similarly, one’s access to, or knowledge of, local clubs and/or programs can do the same.

The current context is one in which many would benefit from improved and shared knowledge, understanding, and action related to the sport and recreation pursuits of newcomer youth in Canada. Recognizing this, we contacted community partners actively engaged with the Syrian community (this included one of the invited participant-researchers, who had then developed relationships with

members of the Syrian community through her volunteer work). With the assistance of these community partners, all Syrian youth in the surrounding area were invited to be involved in the project. Those who were interested and obtained parent/guardian approval participated. Through this partnership, we established a community-based PAR project that could address the underrepresentation of these youth in their new community's sport and recreation programs. It is from this community-based PAR project that we and our Syrian youth participants were enabled to co-create and implement the Syrian Youth Sports Club.

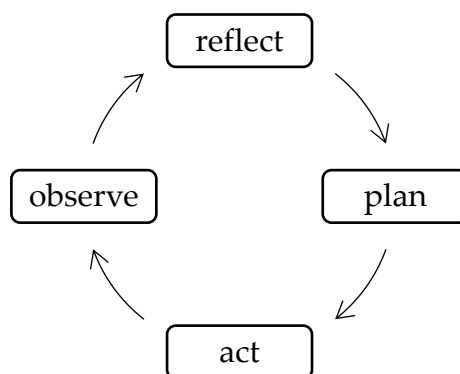


**Figure 1.** Four systems (individual, social/interpersonal, organizational/community, public policy) of the social ecological model, with specific examples for each level.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. PAR

Action research includes four “moments” that are dynamic, interconnected, and cyclical: plan, act, observe, and reflect (Kemmis et al. 2004) (see Figure 2). PAR is a type of action research that is people-centered, power-conscious, and action-oriented (Kemmis 2006; Sohng 1996); the use of this research methodology can be seen in numerous studies related to sport and physical activity (e.g., see Ferkins et al. 2010; Frisby et al. 2005; Sherry et al. 2017). PAR is somewhat unique in that it offers “research participants” the opportunity to create the conditions for themselves to actively develop forms of action that are in response to their own unmet needs or undesirable conditions, while also building and establishing genuine communities of practice (Kemmis et al. 2014). PAR is also often unapologetically critical whereby, for example, those who engage in it are called upon to recognize and identify “unwelcome truths” (Kemmis 2006, p. 459). Engaging in this sort of inquiry, then, required us (i.e., the participant-researchers) to: (1) welcome our youth participants as genuine partners in the process; and (2) maintain our critical position, even while aiming for, observing, and reporting on the successes of the Syrian Youth Sports Club.



**Figure 2.** Four moments of action research (plan, act, observe, reflect).

## 2.2. Procedures

This community-based PAR project included three stages (see Table 1). Methodological procedures from the International Institute for Child Rights and Development's child-centered PAR were used to develop the key steps of the process (Currie and Heykoop 2011). During Stage 1, we participant-researchers spent six full mornings with our Syrian youth participants. This time was largely spent establishing "buy-in" from the youth. Previous relationships between one of the participant-researchers and many of the youth eased the transition to establishing group trust. As well, three of us organized and participated in activities such as leadership games and creative pursuits in order to foster relationships between ourselves and the youth. Also in Stage 1, we spent time engaging in initial photovoice and focus group interview sessions, identifying (and addressing) obstacles and opportunities related to sport and recreation participation, and designing a four-season sport and recreation schedule. Action research at this stage was focused, primarily, upon reflection and planning. During Stage 2, Syrian youth participants engaged in their four seasons (tennis, paddling, swimming, basketball) while also attending additional meetings (where photovoice and focus group interview sessions, among other tasks, continued). Action research at this stage was focused on all four steps. Finally, at the conclusion of the four seasons, Stage 3 included four additional meetings in which reflection and planning continued as most or all of participants again engaged in photovoice and focus group interview sessions. Participants who took part in the photovoice and focus group interview sessions were not separated by age or sex due to the strength of the relationships amongst the youth.

**Table 1.** Overview of stages, dates, PAR steps, specific activities, and participants and partners.

Stages, Dates, PAR Steps	Specific Activities	Participants, Partners
<b>Stage 1 Dates:</b> July 2018–August 2018 <b>PAR Steps:</b> reflect, plan	community buy-in, training, picture taking, photovoice, interviews, program planning (6 meetings total)	<b>Participants:</b> 10 youth participants, 3 participant-researchers <b>Partners:</b> local Syrian support group, provincial sport and recreation organization, town adult learning association, town library
<b>Stage 2 Dates:</b> September 2018–January 2019 <b>PAR Steps:</b> act, observe, reflect, plan	activity participation (tennis, paddling, swimming, basketball), picture taking, photovoice, interviews, program planning and reflection meetings (22 activity sessions total, 6 meetings total)	<b>Participants:</b> 9 youth participants, 7 additional peer participants (3 were also Syrian [and Muslim]; 2 were also Muslim), 3 participant-researchers <b>Partners:</b> local paddling society/instructors, local Syrian support group, town adult learning association, town library, town and county recreation departments, university recreation department, university students, university varsity teams (coaches, athletes)
<b>Stage 3 Dates:</b> January 2019–March 2019 <b>PAR Steps:</b> reflect, plan	photovoice, interviews, future program planning and reflection meetings, youth dissemination (4 meetings total)	<b>Participants:</b> 9 youth participants, 3 participant-researchers <b>Partners:</b> local schools, provincial sport and recreation organization, town library

## 2.3. Participants and Partners

A number of participants and partners were involved in this community-based PAR project. The youth participants included the following: (1) nine relatively new-to-Canada Syrian youth refugees who regularly participated in all stages of this project (one additional Syrian youth refugee participated in the initial stage only and is, consequently, not listed here); and (2) seven additional youth visitors who were friends or siblings of some of those in the Syrian Youth Sports Club (three of whom were also Syrian and Muslim, as well as two others who were Muslim). Regular participants were invited to bring friends and/or siblings to the various activities, as they wished. However, only the "regular" youth participants of the Syrian Youth Sports Club who were present for all three stages participated fully in the action research project (the others only participated in some of the activities). Nonetheless,

all youth participants are listed below (see Table 2), with their name (pseudonyms are used), sex, age, grade level, project status (regular/visitor), and seasons in which they participated.

**Table 2.** Overview of youth participants (name, sex, age, grade, regular/visitor, seasons).

Name	Sex	Age	Grade	Regular/Visitor	Seasons
Aaila	Female	8	2	Regular	T, S, B
Aabid	Male	9	3	Regular	T, P, S, B
Wafiq	Male	11	5	Regular	T, P, S, B
Yasmine	Female	11	6	Regular	T, P, S, B
Nazra	Female	12	7	Regular	T, S, B
Mahia	Female	14	7	Regular	T, P, S, B
Dema	Female	14	8	Regular	T, P, S, B
Šaha	Female	15	10	Regular	T, P, S, B
Bahira	Female	19	12	Regular	T, B
Yahya	Male	10	4	Visitor	S, B
Haamid	Male	10	4	Visitor	S, B
Nijat	Male	11	4	Visitor	S, B
Ping	Male	11	5	Visitor	B
Serap	Female	13	7	Visitor	P
Ella	Female	13	8	Visitor	T
Maha	Female	14	8	Visitor	P

Note: T = tennis; P = paddling; S = swimming; B = basketball.

Additionally, other than the three participant-researchers who participated in this project, a number of additional partners were involved. These others included various organizations and those organizations' individuals; these organizations/individuals supported the Syrian Youth Sports Club in many different ways. These organizations/individuals included the local library, recreation departments, and a community organization for newcomer Syrian families, as well as local physical activity leaders who led the four seasons' activities. Two participant-researchers led the tennis, a university instructor/paddling society leader and his students led the paddling, three aquatics instructors led the swimming, and the local university's varsity coaches and players led the basketball. Identifying and welcoming these many community partners was an intended and purposeful decision on the part of us, the participant-researchers.

#### 2.4. Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected through the following data sources: (1) photos and photovoice; (2) participants' drawings and notes; (3) participant-researchers' field notes; and (4) focus group interviews. Photos were shared with the participant-researchers in all three stages; at these sessions photovoice conversations were audio-recorded and transcribed. Participants' drawings and notes were either kept or copied. Field notes were recorded during and/or after meetings and activity sessions. Six focus group interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Thematic analysis (Bernard and Ryan 1998; Boyatzis 1998) was employed to analyze the data. All texts (i.e., participants' drawings and notes, participant-researchers' field notes, transcribed photovoice and focus group interviews) were examined and grouped into themes. An initial participant-researcher coded and categorized textual data as they related to themes according to methods outlined by both Creswell (2012) and Miles et al. (2014). Subsequently, a second participant-researcher engaged in the same exercise. All results are shared only as these two participant-researchers had a 100% agreement about the coded and categorized primary themes.

#### 2.5. Ethical Approval

All research protocols for research involving human subjects were observed. The participant-researchers' universities' Research Ethics Boards (REBs) found that this research was

in full compliance with Canada's Tri-Council Policy Statement: *Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans*. Though not a requirement, as a courtesy we also shared the research protocols with local partners invested in the group of participants.

### 3. Findings

#### 3.1. Initial Identification of Obstacles and Opportunities

Youth participants were encouraged to identify obstacles and opportunities related to "me" (individual), "family/friends" (social/interpersonal or microsystem), and "school/community" (organizational/community or mesosystem) through the use of participatory tools such as photo-voice, risk and resource mapping, and walking tours. In using these practices, they explored the challenges that prevent or hinder their involvement in community sports and recreation. They also identified supports that exist that enable them to participate in such programming in their communities. Through a consideration of the youth participants' photographs/photovoice, their own notes and drawings, transcribed focus group interviews, and our own field notes, a number of obstacles and opportunities were identified within multiple systems.

Within respect to the individual (i.e., "me"-individual), identified obstacles were related to the following: (1) perceived limitations in skills/abilities (e.g., *"I do not know how to canoe"* and *"teachers only explain the game but they don't really work with you to teach you the skills of how to play"*); (2) restrictions related to sex (e.g., *"I am a girl"* and *"it is better to only have girls in gym class"*); and (3) constraining attitudes/beliefs (e.g., *"I can't play because sometimes I should study"* and *"I can be lazy"*). Within the microsystem (i.e., "family/friends"-social/interpersonal), obstacles were related to the following: (1) cultural/religious restrictions (e.g., *"I can't swim with boys because of my culture"* and *"when I am older I am not going to wear the same clothes when I am outside doing sports"*); (2) inactive friends (e.g., *"I don't have friends who encourage me now"* and *"my friends don't do these things"*); and (3) non-encouraging siblings and parents/guardians (e.g., *"sometimes parents don't allow you to have permission [to participate]"* and *"my parents don't really encourage me to join but they allow me to try things"*). Within the mesosystem (i.e., "school/community"-organizational/community), obstacles were related to the following: (1) invisible/inaccessible community programs (e.g., *"I don't know how to sign up for anything here"* and *"they don't tell us where to join"*); and (2) limited access to physical activity spaces (e.g., *"I don't have a pool"* and *"I don't have a membership to places"*).

Though these obstacles were identified, youth participants were also able to identify a number of opportunities that existed within these same systems. For example, with respect to the individual, opportunities were related to the following: (1) enabling attitudes/beliefs (e.g., *"I like PE [physical education]"* and *"I like to be active and I know that it is important to be strong and healthy"*); and (2) positive self-efficacy (e.g., *"I am sporty"* and *"I am good at basketball"*). Within the microsystem, opportunities were related to the following: (1) supportive Syrian friends (e.g., *"Dema, Mahia, Nazra all will do things with me"* and *"friends help you and make you feel comfortable"*); (2) supportive siblings and parents/guardians (e.g., *"my family tells me to go [do sports/activities] if I want to"* and *"my sister and my parents support me [to be active]"*); and (3) emerging allies (e.g., *"you three [leaders] are helping us do things"* and *"Dan, Vanessa, and Ingrid will help us"*).

With this information in hand, we participant-researchers were able to co-create with the Syrian youth a grant-funded program that addressed these obstacles and embraced these opportunities. For example, to address obstacles, we purchased all necessary equipment, booked community gymnasium space, recruited sport and recreation instructors, organized all transportation, and completed most necessary paperwork for parents/guardians. Similarly, to embrace opportunities, we allowed the Syrian youth to choose the four activities, we limited most sessions to their own Syrian peer group, and we maintained our roles as allies to them (e.g., by attending all activity sessions).



### 3.2. On Becoming (Physically Literate) and Belonging

During the four seasons of tennis, paddling, swimming, and basketball, and in a number of meetings afterwards, youth participants met with us to discuss their experiences in the Syrian Canadian Sports Club. Through the continued use of photovoice and focus group interviews, two emergent themes were identified: becoming (physically literate) and belonging.

#### 3.2.1. Becoming (Physically Literate)

Physical literacy, as it is most widely conceptualized, is the “motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge, and understanding to value and take responsibility for engagement in physical activities for life” (Edwards et al. 2017, p. 113). The many parts of this multi-dimensional physical literacy construct are oftentimes framed as affective (motivation and confidence), physical (physical competence), cognitive (knowledge and understanding), and behavioral (lifetime engagement) (see Robinson and Randall 2017; Robinson et al. 2018). Given the earlier mentioned initial impetus of this community-based action research project (i.e., to address the underrepresentation of Syrian youth refugees in community sport and recreation pursuits), a consideration of the Syrian Youth Sports Club experience upon participants’ lifecourse physical literacy journeys is both logical and warranted.

All youth participants made many mentions of how their participation in the Syrian Youth Sports Club impacted their motivation, confidence, physical competence, knowledge, and understanding to value and take responsibility to be active for life. Consider, for example, the following physical literacy-related sentiments shared by the youth participants.

Related to motivation and confidence (affective), participants spoke about becoming able to overcome their initial shyness and insecurities so that there were enabled to become more active:

*[Before I started] I felt of kind of shy to be active because when I was at school people would be better than me because I never took sports in Syria. I just felt like I was being shy. (Dema, 14)*

*Before I never really did anything. I never really liked sports before we started this but, now, I really do. Now I am excited. I'm not shy or scared now. I am excited to do sports. (Yasmine, 11)*

Given our field notes’ common observation that some of the youth were observably much more engaged as the various seasons progressed, we offered some prompting questions about this phenomenon. Consider, for example, the following exchange:

*I was watching you all every day. And, for some of you, something seemed to change. You did not look the same near the end of a season. Can somebody comment on that? (Researcher)*

*The first day when I came back home, I was like, “No, I do not like basketball at all. I don’t want to keep playing.” But then, I really liked it and I wanted to come. (Dema, 14)*

*I just liked it more and more when I got better. Now it is easier and I am not so embarrassed. (Mahia, 14)*

The youth participants also shared accounts of how this newfound motivation and confidence allowed them to be viewed differently by their non-Syrian peers at school:

*It feels a lot better and you get to be known as a sports player because you ... it kinds of feels cool to say that you are playing basketball and other sports that you would not think you’d be playing. (Mahia, 14)*

Related to physical competence (physical), the youth participants recognized the areas in which they believed they had improved. These improvements were related to their sport-specific skills in all four movement experiences:

*I think I am really good at basketball because I was a really good shooter and I can be like that sometimes. (Šaha, 15)*

*I got better at playing tennis and basketball. (Wafiq, 11)*

*I got better at all the sports because I now know how to canoe and play tennis and how to use racquets. And, not just for tennis. But for badminton too. And pickleball. (Aabid, 9)*

*For swimming, when I was not wearing a scarf, I was swimming in the pool but I was just in the shallow end. But, when we did this, when I swam in the deep end and I did swim without anything and it was amazing. I never knew I could do that. I never could do it before. (Mahia, 14)*

Related to knowledge and understanding (cognitive), the youth participants were able to share the perceived benefits they received from being physically active in these various seasons. They came to know, and/or feel, that their sport and recreation participation impacted their affect in a number of manners:

*Each time when we play sports after we are done, I feel better. I feel better. I feel like I want to do more things. I feel more active. (Nazra, 12)*

*I feel happy because I have learned a lot of stuff that I never thought before. (Mahia, 14)*

*I'm happy and proud. I am proud of myself, but I am proud that we did learn stuff and I did learn. (Dema, 14)*

*I feel energized in basketball, tennis, and swimming. In all the things we did. (Aabid, 9)*

Related to engaging in physical activities for life (behavioral), participants spoke of how, only after participating in a season, they began to engage in similar activities when they were without the Syrian Canadian Sports Club. These accounts offered insight into how their Syrian Youth Sports Club participation was positively influencing their ongoing physical activity in their community:

*After we learned things in one of our seasons, did any of you ever do those things on your own time? (Researcher)*

*Yes, me and Dema. We usually would go to the park and all the families go. And, we go now and play [tennis]. In summer we are going to go every day. (Mahia, 14)*

*Me, I now practice at the basketball courts. (Nazra, 12)*

*Did you practice basketball before we did it together? (Researcher)*

*No! (Nazra, 12)*

*And, so, what has changed? (Researcher)*

*I got a lot better and it feels like it is so much easier now. It is easier in the short basketball court too. I never thought I could score on the first try [but I do now]. (Nazra, 12)*

*And, now, after school we bring our basketballs to school on Friday and practice in the gym after school. From 3:00 until 5:00. (Mahia, 14)*

*And now I want to be on the [school] basketball team. Actually, I am now. (Šaha, 15)*



### 3.2.2. Belonging

While the Syrian Youth Sports Club may have been a co-created experience that materialized as the primary product of the community-based PAR project, the youth participants' experiences offered more than sport and recreation opportunities. That is, while they may have been enabled to move along on their physical literacy lifecourse journeys, there were other, arguably more important, outcomes here. More specifically, the youth participants spoke of how the Syrian Youth Sports Club afforded them opportunities to feel more involved and included within their new Canadian community. Consider the following, for example:

*The best days are when we started. When we all met together, here [in the library]. The first day was the best day when we started the group. Until we ended, it's all a good thing. Every day together has been a good day. (Nazra, 12)*

*These have been the best days of my life. (Yasmine, 11)*

*Yeah, I am now involved. (Dema, 14)*

*What do you mean you are now involved? (Researcher)*

*Well, before we made the group [Syrian Canadian Sports Club] we did not really play that much sports. Here [in Canada], if you ask anybody, they play something. We did not play anything when we came here. If they asked me, I did not play anything. But now I do. Now, I just can play. I am now involved. (Dema, 14)*

*Involved in? (Researcher)*

*The community. (Dema, 14)*

*And, how do you all see yourselves as athletes in your new community? (Researcher)*

*Proud! I feel proud. It feels really good to know how to do all these sports now. Before, I said I never thought I would be doing these sports in the future. It is crazy. (Mahia, 14)*

*What about everybody else? Has this experience changed how you feel in your community? (Researcher)*

*I feel more involved too. And, more as a team. (Šaha, 15)*

*I feel more welcome. (Aabid, 9)*

*I feel like a Canadian. (Yasmine, 11)*

*I feel more Canadian because Canadian people do a lot of sports. They know everything. Syrian people, especially girls, they don't do any sports. And, now, I feel that I am more Canadian and that's the thing I am proud of. (Mahia, 14)*

Additionally, not only did the youth participants feel that they were more a part of their new community, but they also saw that they could soon play a role in making others feel welcome too:

*Because this community and program help us to learn those sports, I would like to do the same thing for people. (Dema, 14)*

*I would like to make people feel involved and welcomed in everything like how you made us feel. (Mahia, 14)*

*Especially shy girls. (Dema, 14)*

*Especially girls. In Syria, we would like to also make that program thing and we could. A lot of girls cannot play because of culture and things. We could just create a program [here] for girls and help them be active and play some sports. (Šaha, 15)*

At about the same time, the Syrian Canadian Sports Club was featured in the local newspaper, and youth participants shared the pride they had when their teachers took notice:

*My teacher said, "I saw you in the newspaper today." And he was really proud [of me]. He asked me if he could read it [to the class]. I said, "yes" and do he did. (Wafiq, 11)*

*A teacher at the school said she saw me in the newspaper and she asked me if I had the newspaper. She said, "come with me because I have a lot of them" and she gave it to me. (Nazra, 12)*

### 3.3. Newfound and Unanticipated Difficulties

The Syrian Youth Sports Club was not without difficulties. Two newfound and entirely unanticipated difficulties highlighted others' cultural ignorance and cultural insensitivity. Both of these were related to the youth's participation in swimming.

With respect to cultural ignorance, the swimming season required a number of purposeful actions to address various obstacles, most of which were related to the intersecting identities of sex, religion, and culture. For example, the following actions were undertaken: (1) the female and male participants were split for swimming sessions; (2) the entire pool was booked for the female youth's swimming sessions; (3) burkinis were purchased for all female participants who wore hijabs; (4) curtains were placed inside pool windows to prevent observers from seeing the female participants while they were in the pool, and (5) all lifeguards/instructors for the female participants were female. Notwithstanding the positive intentions related to all of these efforts, on one occasion, female lifeguards/instructors invited a male lifeguard/instructor onto the pool deck despite clear instructions to never do so. Given the presumed safe environment (i.e., girls/women only, curtains, etc.), some of the female youth participants had uncovered their hair by taking the hoods off of their burkinis. When the male lifeguard/instructor entered the pool deck, he and the female lifeguards/instructors were ignorant of the grossly uncomfortable environment they had just created. Their ignorance had both an immediate and continued negative impact on the female participants. In response to this event, the institution's aquatics supervisor, as well as the female and male lifeguards/instructors, provided a letter of apology to the participants and their parents/guardians. Still, the damage was done.

With respect to cultural insensitivity, an anonymous community member submitted an article (that was effectively a letter of complaint) to *Frank* (a provincial scandal/satirical magazine) near the end of the swimming season. While we were made aware of this article only by chance, the contents within in point to the insensitive and arguably xenophobic attitudes that lurk in the shadows within the community. Consider, for example, the anonymous contributor's own words:

*And then I discovered the real scandal that prompted me to write a letter of protest . . . . I was shocked to see the usual window completely covered by an opaque black curtain. I asked at the desk what was going on and was told it was a "private function." Several people I know noticed it too, and it became clear that it was a regular arrangement for Muslim women to swim without being seen by anybody, particularly anybody male . . . . In Canada, women don't need to hide to go to the pool. Our community is very tolerant: everybody frequents the pool, all ages, handicapped people, and usually nobody wants to hide. What kind of integration are these women trying to achieve?... I don't say this out of any anti-immigrant feelings, but because I am convinced that we live in a rather good society and that newcomers should do their best to integrate into it. (2019, p. 32)*

This anonymous author seemed to be unaware that many single-sex (i.e., for women) physical activity opportunities exist throughout the community. Indeed, such an accommodation is a normal feature of many sport and recreation programs for women here and elsewhere. The differences here

are that our participants were youth (and children) rather than women (though she/he did not know that) and that they were also all Syrian Muslims. Consequently, we assume that cultural insensitivity to our participants' intersecting religious and cultural identities was what was really at play here. This othering of our youth participants was certainly a most disappointing occurrence. It is not possible to draw conclusions about the prevalence of racism within the community, but this article indicates that some portion of the population certainly holds these beliefs.

#### 4. Discussion

The obstacles and opportunities that we identified and then addressed or embraced are somewhat familiar within the literature. At the same time, some of these obstacles and opportunities are also somewhat exclusive to our unique context. Or, otherwise said, place matters. With respect to the environment, for example, our site has physical and social obstacles and barriers that are unique to this place and time. Because the youth participants do not live in immigrant enclaves (Portes and Rumbaut 2001), they are neither enabled nor limited by that. Their rural towns are small ones. In the larger of the two towns, virtually any sport or recreation space is accessible by foot. That is, the youth participants could walk to the tennis courts, swimming pool, or basketball courts. Yet, before the advent of the Syrian Youth Sports Club, none did. While the physical environments were always there, they were not being accessed—or, were not actually accessible.

So, how is it that these Syrian youth had access to the spaces but did not actually access them? In order for these sorts of spaces to be welcoming to those who show up in the community already being othered, more is needed. For example, sport and recreation programs' usual methods of communication and recruitment are aimed at the "normal" Canadian child/youth/family. This is true of language, media messaging, fees/costs, and entry stages. However, not all newcomers can speak English, can access social media sources (e.g., Facebook), can afford registration fees and/or equipment costs, or have played the necessary prerequisite years within a sport before. So, while a glance at a physical environment might suggest that a space is there for participation, a closer consideration of the social(ized) environment might reveal that having a space, alone, does not necessarily translate into use.

Perhaps there is no better example of this than what transpired at the pool. That is, though the physical space had been suitably co-created, the social space remained one characterized by closeted resentment and xenophobia. We would suggest that without us being aware of this (through, for example, the anonymous article in *Frank*), minoritized individuals could still see and sense it, even when we allied participant-researchers are unaware. To help illustrate the sort of blindness of the normalized majority, consider that when we requested the pool supervisor consider offering a girls/women-only swim time once a week, the pool manager explained that because there was no expressed community need of this sort, it would not make sense to offer it. (This despite our request being, quite literally, an expression of interest.)

With respect to becoming (physically literate), we know that these conclusions are based, almost entirely, on the youth participants' own self-appraisals. That is, while it is possible for us to conclude that the youth participants believe they are more motivated, confident, and/or physically active, we also recognize that we are without any of the "objective" data some others might desire. Are they more motivated and confident, simply because they say so? We would say that, yes, they likely are. We say this because they said this to us, repeatedly. Moreover, we watched every session. While doing so, we observed an increase in motivation and confidence. Similarly, are we to believe that they are now more physically active, again, just because they say so? Well, again, in addition to them repeatedly telling us about the increases in their physical activity, we have many first-hand observations of this. We live in a small town—as we explained, one in which you can walk anywhere. We have since seen many of these youth participants playing tennis and basketball in this community. We also know that the local Syrian group has now booked a school gymnasium for weekends. There, our female participants have been on one half of the gymnasium playing the sports we taught them as well as others. So, here we

are trying to recognize that some others might suggest these outcomes ought to have been “measured” to “count.” But, we believe the promise our youth participants shared is genuine and real. Moving forward, we and/or others might be well-served to investigate these outcomes further.

We were especially happy to see our youth participants feel like they belong (more) in their new community. Of course, we strongly believe they should always embrace their Syrian identities. However, that many came to feel more Canadian speaks, we believe, to their social integration, cultural orientation, and developing sense of belonging in a new country. We also think that these same things have allowed the youth participants to develop some social capital that they had until-then not been able to access. Indeed, one of the youth participants has since joined her school’s junior varsity basketball team. Additionally, that some participants asked to bring some of their friends to some of the seasons’ activities speaks, to us, to how their participation in this club gave them some capital with some of their Canadian classmates. We would suggest that their designed Syrian Youth Sports Club “uniforms” afforded them a marker of cultural capital too. As some of the participants observed, all of their Canadian classmates seemed to be sports players of some sort. Those peers, as do many youth who play sports, often wear their teams’ jerseys or jackets to schools, sometimes in response to a school’s theme day. Our participants wore their uniforms to school on all days that they had an after-school activity. And, more telling, they wore them to school on many other days.

It is also important for us to make mention of how parents/guardians provided both obstacles and opportunities. That is, we came to recognize that parents/guardians can be both “non-encouraging” and “supportive” with respect to sport and recreation participation. Many of their non-Syrian peers live in households where parents/guardians would be very actively encouraging their children to join teams or clubs. These parents/guardians have easier access to the sorts of teams and clubs that exist (i.e., they know about them and where to go for them). They also do not have to wrestle with the sorts of competing priorities our Syrian families recognize (e.g., learning English, “catching up” in school after years away from formal education, worshiping without a Mosque, etc.). So, we recognize why these parents/guardians might be less encouraging of sport and recreation participation. We have seen this before, in the literature and also with other immigrant newcomers. Nonetheless, the success of the Syrian Youth Sports Club required parents/guardians to be supportive of our co-created program. And, they were. For this, we are thankful. Their support did not come by chance, nor by blind trust. Rather, we met with them as we began and we constantly in communication with parents/guardians throughout the process. We earned their trust and they paid us back by supporting their children’s continued involvement.

## 5. Conclusions

The most difficult and as-of-yet unmentioned aspect of this Syrian Youth Sports Club is where to go with it now. While we have worked alongside our youth participants to identify and address/embrace obstacles/opportunities, and then design and experience the four-season schedule, we are left wondering, “What now?” More importantly, our youth participants are wondering the same thing.

We suppose that in an ideal world, our youth participants would now have the necessary tools to identify and address and embrace their future obstacles and opportunities. Indeed, we did this already with them. We modeled it. But, they are youth. Some are children. We believe those who provide sport and recreation programs in the community ought to take up some of this responsibility. That is, if they want our local Syrian youth refugees to be included in their sport and recreation programs, they need to make them (more) accessible. They have a role to play here. And, simply declaring that are all welcome is not a welcoming act, at all. That has not worked in the past. We offer possibilities for the future.

We would like to think that we have only opened a door and that others needs to come through the figurative doorway. It is not as though we wish to step aside. Rather, we can continue to hold this door open, and we can at the same time work alongside others as we welcome them through. In the literal sense, this means that we will soon share this very project with local and provincial leaders in

sport and recreation. We will tell them what we have learned, and we will invite our youth participants to share in this exercise. We will also secure additional funding so that we may continue to do this important work with these youth and others moving forward.

Our hope is that others will do the same.

**Author Contributions:** Authors contributed to the manuscript as follows: conceptualization, D.B.R., I.M.R., V.C. and N.H.; data curation, D.B.R. and I.M.R.; formal analysis, D.B.R. and I.M.R.; funding acquisition, D.B.R.; investigation, D.B.R., I.M.R. and V.C.; methodology, D.B.R., I.M.R., V.C. and N.H.; project administration, D.B.R., I.M.R. and V.C.; resources, D.B.R., I.M.R. and V.C.; supervision, D.B.R., I.M.R. and V.C.; validation, D.B.R. and I.M.R.; visualization, D.B.R.; writing—original draft, D.B.R.; writing—reviewing and editing, D.B.R., I.M.R., V.C. and N.H.

**Funding:** This research was funded by a Community Development Grant (PI: D.R.) from Nova Scotia Communities, Culture and Heritage (Communities, Sport and Recreation) and by a University Council for Research Grant (P.I.: D.R.) from St. Francis Xavier University.

**Acknowledgments:** We wish to acknowledge the participation and support given by our various community partners (individuals and organizations).

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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