

Running Head: IMMIGRANT SETTLEMENT

Sport and Physical Recreation in the Settlement of Immigrant Youth

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Abstract

Post-migration sport and physical activity experiences may assist young people with the impact of migration and settlement. To investigate the role of sport and physical recreation in the process of 'fitting in' to a new country, focus group interviews were conducted with 40 ESL high school students from various ethnic backgrounds who were recent immigrants to a regional city in Canada. Findings revealed that sport and recreation are perceived to be fun, healthy, and helpful in the development of language skills and an orientation to the mainstream culture; factors that have been identified elsewhere as key to successful immigrant settlement (e.g., Scott & Scott, 1989; Seat, 2000). However, participation in sport may lead to feelings of social exclusion on the part of young newcomers, because of language difficulties, unfamiliarity with mainstream sports, and prejudice on the part of their peers. The findings have implications for policy and programming that includes sport and physical recreation activities that can enhance the impact of migration.

Keywords: immigration, settlement, sport

### Sport and Physical Recreation in the Settlement of Immigrant Youth

Canada has one of the highest proportions of immigrants to total resident population in the world, therefore, it is not surprising that immigrant settlement is a central public policy issue (Omidvar & Richmond, 2003). Settlement may be defined as “a long-term dynamic, two-way process through which, ideally, immigrants would achieve full equity and freedom of participation in society, and society would gain access to the full human resource potential in its immigrant communities” (Seat, 2000, p. 9). Settlement into a new country encompasses changes in almost every aspect of daily life, placing a range of societal demands and expectations on new arrivals (Dion & Dion, 2001). The processes facilitating or constraining the successful adaptation of newcomers into a community is a multi-faceted issue on which there is much debate (Berry, 1997; Birman & Trickett, 2001; Williams & Berry, 1991).

While the process of adjustment to life in a new country can be exigent for anyone, Kilbride, Anisef, Baichman-Anisef, and Khattar (2000) suggested that the particular challenges of adolescence are greatly compounded by the stresses of settlement. Young immigrants and refugees face physiological and psychological developmental issues specific to adolescence, and they have the added challenge of facing a socialization process that will inevitably lead to a shift in their ethnic identity (Seat, 2000). Research supports the notion that while “problems of adjustment are not inevitable among new immigrants, adolescents who immigrate are at greater risk for problems in psychological adjustment” (Ullman & Tartar, 2001, p. 449). Successful adaptation of adolescents involves balancing heritage culture and the culture of the society of settlement (Sam, 2000). These stresses are influenced by the newcomer’s place of origin, age at arrival, as well as familial and socioeconomic context of settlement (Hirschman, 2001; Scott & Scott, 1989).

It has been argued that engagement in sport and physical recreation can assist with positive identity formation, social inclusion, and the cultural transition process that recent immigrant youth face (Donnelly & Coakley, 2002; Omidvar & Richmond, 2003). Yet there is a dearth of research in this regard. One notable exception is the European Commission on Education and Culture's recently commissioned study examining "the contribution of sport, as an instrument of non-formal education, to the multicultural dialogue between young people, and the part it plays in promoting the integration of recent migratory flows" (Amara, Aquilina, & Henry, 2004, p. 5). Based on secondary data from across the 25 European Union Member States, the final report provided some evidence that sport can play a role in breaking the state of isolation and depression that newcomers go through during their settlement process.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the role of sport and physical recreation in the settlement of young, recent immigrants to Canada. In particular, our intent is to determine whether these particular leisure time activities promote or impinge on the settlement process of immigrant youth. The paper builds on a broader investigation of attitudes and experiences of adolescents who were recent arrivals to Canada (Taylor & Doherty, 2005). It re-examines the data from the perspective of sport and physical recreation as a potential means to facilitate immigrant youth settlement. The focus of the study was high school students in English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) programs<sup>1</sup>, a grouping comprised of recent immigrants from diverse cultural and language backgrounds. Whereas other studies have focused on sport, recreation, and leisure participation among discrete ethnic groups (e.g., Tirone & Pedlar, 2000; Yu & Berryman, 1996), we chose to focus our study on a diverse mix of young newcomers, reflecting the reality of immigration in Canada as well as their representation in the school system. The

participants in the study comprised both immigrants and refugees to Canada, but were not distinguished by these groupings.

## Review of Literature

### *Immigrant Settlement*

Settlement is an ongoing process of adjustment, adaptation, and integration (Kerr & Simard, 2003). Seat (2000) defined settlement and adaptation as a process by which immigrants come to achieve full and equitable participation in society. It is based on newcomers' ability to cope with, and adjust to, the natural and social demands of one's environment; specifically, the degree to which one is able to function independently, and meet the culturally imposed demands of individual and social responsibility (Seat). Successful settlement and integration is an important objective of the Canadian government: "In order to maximize the economic, social and cultural benefits of immigration, newcomers must be able to participate fully in Canadian society and have access to the same quality of life that Canadians enjoy" (Citizenship and Immigration, 2005a, p. 41). The immigrant and refugee youth interviewed by Seat described settlement as simply "belonging" or fitting in; feeling part of the society and community where they live.

Based on the combined results of a longitudinal study of immigrants to Australia, and studies of immigrants in the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada, Scott and Scott (1989) proposed a model delineating important predictors and outcomes of immigrant adaptation and settlement. The outcomes of adaptation focus on national identity, life satisfaction, and role performance. According to Scott and Scott, life satisfaction is an indication of internal adjustment, and reflects such attitudes as satisfaction with one's circumstances, friends, job, family, and recreation. Role performance is an indication of

external adjustment, and reflects states such as economic well-being, job performance, academic performance, use of community offerings, and contribution to one's community (Scott & Scott, 1989). The model identifies several predictors of these outcomes: environmental stressors and facilitators in the immigrant's new setting, demographic and background characteristics the immigrant brings to that setting, relations among members of the migrating family, cultural skills brought and developed during the immigrant's settlement process (including language), the immigrant's personality (e.g., optimism, hardiness, locus of control), and personal reactions to one's new community (including friends, work, school, and activities). Notably, language and other cultural skills of the immigrant's new country are seen as mediating other outcomes, rather than as the ultimate adaptation outcomes themselves. Scott and Scott noted that the model propounds a "reasonable sequencing of experiences for many individuals, rather than a firm chain of causation" (p. 21). As well, an underlying assumption of their model is that adaptation proceeds simultaneously or successively in different domains, such as family, work and school.

In Canada, the mission of the federal government is to "build a stronger Canada, by supporting the successful integration of newcomers" (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2005b, p. 1). Immigrant settlement is supported by policy and services at the federal, provincial, and community levels. For example, Citizenship and Immigration Canada sponsors the Immigrant Settlement and Adaptation Program (ISAP), which provides funding to businesses, non-profit groups, educational institutions, and provincial or municipal governments to offer direct services to newcomers or to strengthen program delivery (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2000). Typical settlement services include reception upon arrival to Canada, information and orientation, referrals to community resources (e.g., banks, health, educational

and legal facilities), interpretation and translation, individual and family counseling, language training, and employment-related assistance (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2000; Kerr & Simard, 2003; Omidvar & Richmond, 2003). Funding for these programs and resources comes not only from federal, provincial, and municipal governments, but also from community charities and private foundations, while the delivery is predominantly carried out by community-based immigrant service agencies (Omidvar & Richmond).

Despite these efforts, it is far from a perfect system. Settlement programming has been criticized for its short-term focus on the initial stages of adaptation immediately following arrival to Canada (Omidvar & Richmond, 2003). It has been argued that the lack of continued support for immigrants beyond this preliminary stage is largely responsible for the “dramatic downward shift in the economic status of newcomers to Canada in the last 20 years, [including] severe difficulties in the Canadian labour market and associated problems of individual and family poverty” (Omidvar & Richmond, p. 2). Clark (2003) noted a similar pattern in the United States. Underutilization of immigrants’ skills seems to be a key factor in this trend (Omidvar & Richmond). In a study that compared different countries, Reitz (1998) found that continued support for immigrants’ settlement was a critical factor in their economic success and socio-political inclusion. According to Seat (2000):

The nature of work with immigrant and refugee populations has been more focused on the organization, quality and delivery of relevant settlement services. In order to understand the needs and create more sensitive settlement and other related services for immigrant and refugee newcomers [we need more] information about psychological factors that determine that settlement, adaptation and integration process (p. 8).

*Settlement of Immigrant Youth*

Young newcomers represent a distinct group of immigrants with unique challenges. Immigrant adolescents have been found to express less satisfaction with their lives, to experience greater alienation from their social environment, and emphasize more self-reflection in their self-concept (Ullman & Tatar, 2001). These youth are in the midst of experiencing an identity shift to adulthood, as well as identification with a new country—they face changes in their social environment, including family routines, school, and interpersonal relationships (Yu & Berryman, 1996). The outcomes of dealing with the typical pressures of adolescence, along with the demands of cultural transition, are highly salient for immigrant youth. Fitting in to a new school, getting along with teachers and peers, peer rejection, anxiety, and feelings of isolation are of immediate relevance, yet they are also important predictors of later outcomes of the settlement, adaptation, and integration process (Seat, 2000).

Recent research has identified what young immigrants themselves consider to be key factors that promote and impinge on successful settlement in their adopted country (Kilbride et al., 2000; Kunz & Hanvey, 2000; Seat, 2000). In one focus group study, young immigrants described the importance of fitting in to the mainstream society, “as a promising pathway toward their future personal achievement and progress” (Seat, p. 30). Notably, a few felt that power and money were what made the difference to future success. Across all of the studies, English language difficulty was mentioned as the first and the most difficult aspect of settlement. A lack of English language proficiency contributed to the adolescents’ fear, confusion, and feelings of isolation and marginalization (Seat). The young newcomers reported that, in schools, they could not communicate with other students, could not understand their teachers, and could not express their feelings. Kilbride et al. also found that lack of language proficiency was perceived to be a barrier for recently arrived youth in school, in work, and with



respect to generally “fitting in.” Experiences with prejudice and discriminatory behaviour on the part of their peers were other difficult and, unfortunately, common factors that affected the settlement of young immigrants. Both racial and cultural differences were bases of this intolerance (Kilbride et al.; Kunz & Hanvey, 2000; Seat). Another factor that detracted from adolescent newcomers’ effective settlement was the perception that their parents were weak role models in the new environment of the adopted country (Kilbride et al.; Seat). Parents were experiencing their own stress and confusion as they struggled to settle into work and family life (Seat). Children saw that their parents’ disappointment, frustration, confusion, marginalization, and identity were “shaken by their experience of being uprooted, and of being lost between “there” (home country) and “here” (life in Canada)” (Seat, p. 35). In addition, the young immigrants experienced pressures to maintain, and continue to develop, their home culture while adapting to the culture of their new country. This tended to cause conflict between children and parents, and a degree of emotional turmoil on the part of the adolescents themselves (Kilbride et al.).

Not surprisingly, research on factors influencing the settlement of recently arrived adolescents further indicated that English language proficiency was a fundamental factor for successful participation in Canadian society (Kilbride et al., 2000; Seat, 2000). Another fundamental factor promoting settlement was having friends. Adolescents’ close friends tended to be from the same culture and spoke the same language (Seat). These connections helped the young immigrants to feel accepted and valued in their new country, as they could share ideas and activities, and express how they felt during the settlement process. This was particularly important in the period immediately following their arrival (Seat). Young immigrants also reported communicating with mainstream peers and those from other ethnic groups.

Connections with mainstream peers tended to be functional or task-oriented, such as working on class projects or participating in sports. Friendships were more likely to develop with immigrants from other ethnic groups versus mainstream peers, due to joint participation in ESL classes, shared religion, or living in the same neighbourhood. Teachers were another potentially positive factor in the settlement of recently arrived adolescents (Seat). Most students reported that their teachers were very helpful and supportive. They found they could communicate openly with their teachers, who were very understanding of the students' struggles. It was not unusual for the teacher to be a more meaningful role model than the parents of young immigrants as they settled into life in their new country. Yet, this was not the case for everyone, as some teachers were also reported as racist, sexist, and apathetic to the needs of immigrant students (Seat). Throughout the previous studies, the key role of the school in the successful settlement of young immigrants was noted (Kilbride et al.; Kunz & Hanvey, 2000; Seat). It was a place for learning English language, for developing friendship, and for experiencing the support of adults who become central in their lives.

### *Sport, Physical Recreation, and Settlement*

Research on the sport, recreation, and leisure participation of immigrants has evolved as a distinct area of investigation within the broader examination of the leisure behaviour of racial and ethnic minorities. Yet, "despite the growing interest in issues of immigrant leisure, this strand of research remains in an early stage of development" (Stodolska & Yi, 2003, p. 50). The research has generally focused on (1) the nature of immigrants' participation – what they do, where, with whom, and changes in participation patterns after immigration, and (2) factors influencing that participation, particularly constraints such as discrimination, language and money (Carrington, Chivers, & Williams, 1987; Grey, 1992; Juniu, 2000; Rublee & Shaw,

1991; Stodolska, 1998, 2000; Stodolska & Alexandris, 2004; Stodolska & Yi; Taylor, 2001; Taylor & Doherty, 2005; Tsai & Coleman, 1999; Yu & Berryman, 1996). An underlying assumption of this work has been that sport and recreation participation have positive outcomes (e.g., Yu & Berryman). Improved health, learning and academic achievement, development of leadership and communication skills, improvement of self-esteem and confidence, improved quality of life, increased participation in community, and development of new skills are some of the benefits that have been purported to accrue through sport and physical recreation (see Donnelly & Coakley, 2002). Leisure experiences, in general, typically provide opportunities for young people to “learn new skills, to experiment with adult roles, and to learn what is acceptable in terms of behaviours, styles, and attitudes within a social group” (Tirone & Pedlar, 2000, p. 147). Yet, there has been limited research on whether sport and physical recreation facilitates immigrant settlement, particularly among newcomer youth.

Several studies that have examined the relationship between sport, physical recreation, and general leisure in the settlement, adaptation, and integration of immigrants are reviewed here. Rublee and Shaw (1991) conducted perhaps one of the first investigations focusing specifically on the role of leisure, as well as community participation and paid and family work, in the social integration process of recent immigrants. Leisure was broadly defined as “social and enjoyable activities that are part of everyday life” (Rublee & Shaw, p. 145), and integration as “some sense of feeling at home in a new country and some sense of having the ability, if desired, to participate fully in that society” (p. 135). The results of their interviews with 13 women from Latin America revealed that one’s ability to be involved in work or job training outside the home, as well as participation in community and leisure activities, influenced general well-being or quality of life, which were perceived to be conditions for social

integration. The immigrant women identified language skills, reception and orientation to one's new country, support from one's own ethnic community, and day care access as factors influencing their mobility to work and participation in community and leisure activities.

In a later study, Tirone and Pedlar (2000) examined the role of leisure in the daily life and sense of identity of second generation immigrant teens. The study was replicated by Taylor (2001) with first generation immigrant women in Australia and, together, they warrant review here. Tirone and Pedlar, and then Taylor, found that the key issue in the leisure participation of both these groups was the challenge of finding a balance between the cultural expectations of their families and mainstream society. However, achieving this balance enabled them to have what Tirone and Pedlar referred to as "the best of both worlds" through leisure activities. Of particular relevance to the current paper was the finding that leisure was enabling in the process of integration or "fitting in" to mainstream society, particularly by helping to develop social relationships that are important to the adolescent development and settlement process (Seat, 2000; Tirone & Pedlar, 2000). Nevertheless, in both studies, discrimination and alienation in the recreation setting, due to lack of English language proficiency and racial and cultural differences, presented daunting barriers to feeling accepted and comfortable in the greater society.

In a recent study, Stodolska and Alexandris (2004) examined the role of recreational sport in the adaptation of adult Korean and Polish immigrants to the United States. The authors identified one sub-group that adopted the mainstream culture by establishing social contacts through their own and their children's recreational sport participation. For some of these adult immigrants, it was their first interaction with mainstream Americans. For many, sport participation led to the development of friendships and valued business contacts, and provided

an opportunity to enjoy recreational facilities and services that were not available in their home country. Stodolska and Alexandris also identified a second sub-group of adult immigrants, for whom recreational sport was a means to develop their own ethnically constituted subculture. For example, evidence of “subculture leisure” was present in the Korean immigrants’ widespread participation in golf; a circumstance that was attributed to both a latent demand for the sport in their home country, and to the fact that least one Korean (Se Ri Pak of the LPGA) had achieved considerable international success. Finally, a third sub-group of adult immigrants used sport participation to preserve the values of their ethnic group and to further reinforce in-group solidarity. The Korean immigrants used golf to perform this function, while ethnic sports clubs played a similar role for Polish immigrants. Stodolska and Alexandris concluded that the context of participation, rather than the type of activity, was most meaningful to the role of leisure in the lives of immigrants.

These studies have enriched our understanding of the role of sport, physical recreation, and particularly general leisure in the settlement process of immigrant populations. The current study contributes to the existing literature in this area by examining the role of sport and physical recreation in the settlement of young newcomers. Factors associated with sport and physical recreation that promote or impinge the process of “full participation in Canadian society” (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2005, p. 41) or, as youth see it, simply “fitting in,” were considered. This study focuses on the experiences of a mixed group of ESL students, whose diversity reflects the reality of immigration in Canada. They were interviewed within the school setting, however discussions were not limited to their experiences at school..

## Methods

A series of focus group interviews were conducted as part of a larger study examining the attitudes and experiences of ESL students with regard to physical education, recreation, and sport. Focus group participants were ESL students from three high schools in a mid-sized city in Ontario, Canada. Students were from D and E level classes, which constitute the highest level of language proficiency in this program. Forty students voluntarily participated in one of eight same-sex focus group sessions, with the groups ranging in size from four to six participants. Same-sex groups were arranged as it was felt that the young people would be more comfortable participating under those conditions. As part of the larger project, students completed a survey that included questions about their background and participation in sport and physical recreation.

Participants comprised 21 females and 19 males, ages ranging from 14 to 20 years ( $M=16.7$ ). They resided in Canada from 6 months to 5 years ( $M=2.4$ ). The students came from 18 different cultural backgrounds and spoke 15 different first languages<sup>2</sup>. Most of the students had participated in sport or physical recreation at least once a week in the previous year. The young men participated primarily in basketball and soccer, which they played both in school and outside of school, informally and as a part of organized teams. They were also casually involved in weight training at school, and running and swimming outside of school with family and friends. At school, the young women tended to play volleyball, but only on an informal basis. They were more likely to participate in sport and physical recreation outside of school—especially swimming and fitness activities—with family and friends. All of the ESL students wanted to participate in sport and physical recreation more often, and especially to do so with friends and family.

Consent to conduct the study was obtained from the school board, the principal at each school, and the D and E level ESL teachers. All students in the D and E level ESL classes were given a letter of information and invited to participate. Written consent was obtained from the students who were interested in being involved, and from the parents of the students who were less than 16 years of age. Focus group interviews were conducted in the ESL classroom during the school lunch hour. Permission was given by all of the students (or their parents, where required) to audio-record the sessions. Permission was also given by the students (or their parents) in five of the eight groups to video-record the focus group sessions, and this was done to assist with transcription. A semi-structured interview guide was developed to discuss the students' experiences of participation in sport and physical recreation, the best and worst things about participating, and whether there was anything related to their background culture that was a factor in their participation choices. The focus group interviews were transcribed verbatim. For the purpose of this paper, we used a constant comparative method (Patton, 2002) to review the data, and to identify and cluster consistent themes and supporting quotes pertaining to the role of sport and physical recreation in the settlement of the students. To obtain the fullest possible sense of their perceptions of physical activity, we considered it appropriate to include in our analysis their comments about sport and physical recreation participation in the physical education setting.

The interviewers were both Canadian-born white, female academics with English as a first language. We acknowledge that, given our backgrounds as females who identify strongly as active sport and recreation participants, we may have inherent biases. As well, our gender and ethnicity may be expected to have influenced the research. Kosygina (2005) noted that female researchers often experience discrepancies between interviews with women and men,

where women may be more willing to speak with a female researcher, with whom they expect to share similar social experiences. Cox (2004) suggested that, while a researcher's race or ethnicity will inevitably influence the research, open-ended and semi-structured interviews and other qualitative methods may be more effective than more traditional, quantitative methods for collecting data across races. The interactive interview situation provides for flexibility in wording, explanations, and locating issues in context, for both the interviewer and participant. Within a group of participants from diverse cultures and language backgrounds, cultural meanings and interpretations will often require clarification or further elaboration.

### Findings

Several themes emerged from the focus group data that shed light on the role of sport and physical recreation in the settlement of young, recent immigrants to Canada. These themes identified both positive and negative outcomes associated with participation. The students indicated that participation in sport provided them with a sense of psycho-social well-being, physical well-being, an opportunity to develop English language skills, and an opportunity to familiarize themselves with some aspects of Canadian culture. However, they also described circumstances where they experienced social exclusion in participation due to language difficulties, unfamiliarity with the activities, and prejudice related to their cultural differences. The students further noted the influence of teachers and coaches in helping to alleviate the sense of social exclusion in sport. These themes are examined in more detail below.

#### *Psycho-Social Well-being*

The main motivation for participation in sport and physical recreation that students reported was “fun” and social opportunities. Both male and female students talked about how playing sports and participating in physical activity made them happy, and commented that it



was better “than sitting at home and watching TV and sitting there being uncomfortable” (Serbian female). For some, participation provided an enjoyable outlet that they did not have access to before coming to Canada: “I love playing sport even though I don’t know how to play it. Because back home [they] don’t let us [women] play sport. The government don’t let the woman play” (Yemeni female). These positive outcomes of participation appeared to enhance the young newcomers’ settlement into their adopted country. The immigrant women interviewed by Rublee and Shaw (1991) indicated that general well-being that was from leisure activities was essential to social integration. Scott and Scott (1989) identified life satisfaction, or being happy with various aspects of one’s circumstances, as one of the key indicators of successful settlement. However, Ullman and Tatar (2001) reported that young immigrants expressed less satisfaction in their lives than mainstream youth. Given the stresses of moving to a new country, learning a new language and culture, and trying to fit in and feel part of the school and residential community, the opportunity to simply “have fun” is seen as very positive, and sport and physical recreation provides a meaningful opportunity in that regard.

Participating in sport and physical recreation with friends or family was important for the students in this study. “Just having fun with friends and family,” was what a young Kosovar woman liked most about physical activity. A young Iranian woman noted, “When I went jogging with my dad in the morning, and then I came home, I feel kind of happy.” An Iranian female student described that she “[liked] walking with my brother, in the night or maybe after school, especially in the summertime or springtime.” The opportunity to participate with family members in a positive leisure activity may be particularly important given the stresses a family goes through while settling in a new country (Scott & Scott, 1989). These tensions include parents’ struggle to settle into work and family life, and the conflict between adolescents and

parents that may arise from being “caught between two cultures,” when young people feel pressured by family members to retain cultural traditions and beliefs (e.g., Dion & Dion, 2001; Kilbride et al., 2000; Seat, 2000; Tirone & Pedlar, 2000). The struggle at home to settle into work and family life was described by several students, however there was no mention of cultural conflict. This is somewhat unusual, given that this tension is a widely discussed phenomenon in the immigrant literature. It may reflect a biased sample of students, who happened not to experience notable cultural conflict at home, or the students may not have been forthcoming about this personal experience in the focus group setting. Nevertheless, the value the students placed on participating with family members suggests that sport and physical recreation may be a positive leisure outlet for recent immigrant families.

The students also described participating in sport and physical recreation with friends from their home country, other ESL students, and “mixed” groups of friends that included both immigrants and Canadians. The male students were more likely to talk about participating in mixed groups. Meeting new people from other ethnic groups and mainstream Canadians was seen as a valued aspect of sport and physical recreation. A male student from Kosovo commented, “After school I do different sports with different people. Like soccer, biking, basketball. I play floor hockey with my Canadian friends after school.” When asked what it was like being on the school soccer team, an Albanian male student explained, “It’s nice to meet all of them. It’s nice to know people from other countries. It is good.” Another student from Kosovo who was also on the soccer team described, “It’s fun. When you play you make jokes. [Also] a lot of friends played so I wanted to go.” A young Croatian described how she felt about fitting in at the local ski club where she was a member:

Just pretty good actually. They were all nice to me because I was new and everything. It was often we would all go out and, like, still keep in touch now. They are all Canadians except one girl, she is from Europe, she's from I think Poland.

A young Afghani male talked about his experiences:

At school [lunch] I usually play with my classmates, school kids, like these guys [fellow ESL students], our friends. Outside [of school] I usually play with my neighbours and we're all friends. My hope is to play with everybody. I don't care if he's Canadian or if he's from Afghanistan or Iran or Pakistan, I just want to play with everybody, because I know everyone has one good thing you can learn from them.

Previous research also indicated that sport and recreation was a way for new immigrants to develop friendships and valuable contacts, both within and outside their cultural group (Stodolska & Alexandris, 2004; Taylor, 2001; Tirone & Pedlar, 2000). Seat (2000) and Tirone and Pedlar reported that having friends was a fundamental factor in the successful settlement of newcomer youth. The findings here indicate that the chance to socialize with friends and enjoy a positive leisure activity was a key feature of participation for the adolescent students in this study. Also, participation was a potentially positive experience regardless of whom they recreated with.

The group setting was emphasized as being particularly valued, including being a member of a sports team. A Sudanese male student was very enthusiastic about his involvement on the basketball team: "I have good friendships with my teammates. . . so that was a good time." A Yemeni female also talked about her participation in basketball:

I like basketball. And I find a group plays really good basketball. And I am bad at it. It's really great fun, though. Any sport is fun actually. If you don't know the rules just figure it, something like that. I like team. Somebody else, they will help me with team. And also good fun joining a group.

When asked what she liked best about physical activity, a Chinese female also remarked, "Basketball. For basketball, is very important, team. Just, you go to work together very close, you can play better game." The apparent importance of the group setting for these students

reinforces the role of sport as a leisure activity that can assist with the settlement process, given that socializing is a natural feature of this recreational activity.

Finally, a few students also noted that participation in sport and physical recreation was a chance for them to have a positive challenge, to be good at something, and to feel they have control over things that happen to them. When asked about his cross country running, a young Iraqi male explained, “I love it and so we challenge all the other schools; hundreds of runners, through the woods and across the fields, and its just enjoyable.” A Sudanese male student described, “When I came last year I joined the school team for basketball. I really liked the sport. Because of my height, I am tall, so I am good at it. I think that’s why I like it.” An Afghani male said that he simply “[likes] being physical. Its great, to be healthy, do something, and to be good at it.” Engagement in leisure activities has been found to provide an opportunity for developing positive self-identity, self-concept, and self-esteem (Mannell & Kleiber, 1997). Gaining a sense of accomplishment through sport and recreation participation may be particularly important to young newcomers, given the other life challenges that they face (Yu & Berryman, 1996).

### *Physical Well-Being*

As indicated in the previous section, sport and recreation were also described by the students as healthy leisure activities. It was important to the focus group participants to feel healthy and to be in shape: “[Physical activity] makes you healthy, and makes you tired but still it covers a little bit of your free time so it’s good,” an Iranian male commented. An Afghani women added, “When you do activity after you study you feel good, just like about your health.” In the words of a Yemeni women, physical well-being was also empowering: “It is very good for yourself and having a good body and it’s strong, you have the power.”. There is

little doubt about the potential physical health benefits of sport and physical recreation participation (cf. Donnelly & Coakley, 2002). It is interesting, however, that there does not appear to have been any consideration in the literature of physical health as an important indicator of successful immigrant settlement. Nevertheless, good physical health would seem to be a logical factor, and warrants further consideration, in the conceptualization and measurement of predictors of immigrant settlement. The students in this study felt that sport and recreation participation could elicit these physical health benefits.

*Developing English Language Skills*

English language proficiency is undoubtedly a fundamental factor in successful immigrant settlement among adolescents and adults (e.g., Kilbride et al., 2000; Rublee & Shaw, 1991; Scott & Scott, 1989; Seat, 2000; Taylor, 2001; Tirone & Pedlar, 2000). In this study, many students described sport and physical recreation participation as an opportunity to learn and improve their English. One Sudanese male described the experience of playing on a school team: “A few months I play with them I learn a lot of things. I practice in English with other Canadians. So, when I started practicing with those guys I really improved my English.” When asked why he wanted to try out for the school soccer team, a Korean student explained, “I can really learn English from the team because we need a lot of conversation when we’re playing soccer.” Other students described how participating informally in sport and recreation with mainstream students helped them develop language proficiency: “I know if I play with a Canadian, [I can improve] my pronunciation, I can learn lots of English words.” Interestingly, the opportunity to learn English was identified as a product of sport and recreation participation by the young men more often than by the young women.

This study indicates that sport and physical recreation are meaningful sites for the development of English language proficiency among young newcomers, which is critical to their successful integration and participation in Canadian society. Stodolska and Alexandris (2004) also found that recreational sport participation in one’s neighborhood facilitated English language development for some recent adult immigrants. One of the reasons for this finding in the current study is the fact that, in the school yards, in the neighborhood settings, during physical education classes, and in school and club sport teams, young newcomers participated in groups that comprised either a mix of immigrants from different cultural backgrounds, or a mix

of immigrants and Canadians. In both cases, English was, by necessity, the common language. For instance, a Kosovar male explained that, when he plays soccer, he mainly speaks English: “If someone is from your country then you speak with them in your own language, but otherwise you speak English.” Sport and physical recreation lends itself to communication, because of the opportunity to simply socialize while participating, and the need for “a lot of conversation when we’re playing” (Korean male).. The fact that the female students did not comment to the same extent as the male students on sport as a vehicle for English language development may reflect their lower likelihood of participation in mixed group settings. The young women did not elaborate on why they were less likely to participate in mixed groups, however it may be a function of their perceptions of social exclusion, which is reported below.

#### *Familiarization with the Mainstream Culture*

Many students described sport and physical recreation participation as an opportunity to learn more about Canadian culture, including trying “Canadian” sports. Several students adapted to the different range of physical activity opportunities available to them in Canada by learning to play sports that were completely new. An Iraqi male student recalled, “When I came here [they asked me] ‘want to play football?’ I thought it was soccer, I said okay. I went to the field, I didn’t know what it was. I was so surprised. I was shocked.” A male student from Kosovo described his experience playing floor hockey with Canadian friends after school: “When I first came, yeah [it was difficult]. I didn’t know the rules and stuff. But now I know the rules and I know how to play.”

While other students had not yet taken the opportunity to learn new sport and physical recreation activities, they did express an intention to do so, to assist with their settlement and integration. An Iraqi female explained,

It's in my head, like, maybe in the future I will try some of these winter activities. It's Canada, so we should try some of these winter activities. I know it's important. It's nice, actually, communicating with Canadian people.

Participating in sport and physical recreation also provided exposure to related cultural practices, such as the “ritual of the change room” and the “right” clothes to wear. When asked to compare Canada with their home country an Iraqi and a Kosovar youth explained,

The way they change [for gym and sports], because back in my country we didn't change. If you wore the jeans you just play with jeans and no running shoes, you just play without, we didn't change. And now here we can tell who just play hockey. Back there you couldn't tell who played that and any other person. (Iraqi male)

Well, you would wear anything compared to here. (Kosovar male)

Through exposure to new and different activities the students were able to develop an understanding about various aspects of Canadian culture that subsequently aided their settlement process, whether it was by simply being exposed to new activities, actually learning a new game, or picking up various cultural nuances associated with sport and recreation. This finding is consistent with Scott and Scott's (1989) contention that one's skills or understanding of the culture of the adopted country is an important factor in fitting into mainstream society. Tirone and Pedlar (2000), Taylor (2001), and Stodolska and Alexandris (2004) also found that participation in leisure activities provided an opportunity for immigrants to experience and develop their understanding of the mainstream culture; whether it was spending social time with parents of other children in the same dance class, playing “dress up like we are going to the Prom” (Tirone & Pedlar, p. 155), or just exploring “the Aussie way of life” through recreation (Taylor, p. 544). Stodolska and Alexandris reported that some of the adult immigrants in their study increased their participation in recreational sport because they came to realize that “sports were immensely popular in this country and were associated with a higher social status and a desirable way of life” (p. 397). While the students in the current study did not specifically



indicate that sport gave them greater status, they did note that it helped them fit in because they learned more about Canadian culture through sport and physical recreation participation.

### *Social Exclusion*

There are many aspects of sport and physical recreation that may enhance settlement or fitting into one's adopted country. However, the young people interviewed in this study also talked about experiences with participation (or anticipated participation) that could be viewed as a negative factor in their settlement, due to the social exclusion they elicited. Social exclusion in this sense related to the mechanisms that act to detach groups of people from the social mainstream (Collins, Henry, Houlihan, & Buller, 1999).

The ESL students reported feeling excluded in sport and physical recreation because of their limited English language skills, their lack of familiarity with the intent and the rules of a particular game or activity (and their lack of language ability to communicate this), and prejudice and discrimination on the part of their mainstream peers. A focus group of male students discussed how sport and recreation participation could lead to feelings of social exclusion. A Sudanese male began by noting, "I think the first problem is language. It's just different for everybody. Some ESL student[s], they're afraid." Another student elaborated on that sentiment:

Yeah, they [ESL students] don't know how to play a sport and they don't try because they make a mistake or something and Canadians say 'oh, look at that immigrant' and stuff, and they make fun of them and they don't feel comfortable playing in that sport and they never try again. (Kosovar male)

The Sudanese male student further suggested that some of the ESL students are scared, partly because they wear different clothes than the Canadians and then they would be laughed at. Yet another student noted that,

They [the ESL students] think they'll look losers, you know, the coach asks you to get in groups and then you find nobody to get in a group. Maybe looks like nothing, but when you're in it you won't do it. Because everyone gets in a group, then you're left and coach is waiting and it's hard. Another thing is, you're not familiar with the rules. Sometimes when the coach is explaining the rules and other things at practices you're not able to understand. (Afghani male)

The young women described similar experiences with social exclusion as the male students, however they seemed to be more affected by it, often leading them to discontinue their participation:

Sometimes they [other girls] made fun of you, like, if you don't know how to shoot and do something they just say 'Oh my God, if you don't know how to do this why you play? Why you come to this class?' You know, like, they are hurting you. You should ignore. What you are going to say? You already don't know how to play. You don't have any answer why you should play. (Yemeni female)

I felt I didn't fit in, that's why I stopped. When I had my [physical education] I had some problems in English, sometimes she [another Albanian girl in the group] helped me. When I talked they just find it very strange, like you are an alien. (Albanian female)

In addition to having difficulty with language, not knowing the rules of a game, or not having the skills to play, some female students were also concerned that they did not have the right clothes, which contributed to their sense of social exclusion. A Syrian female commented, "I want to go, like, I signed up last semester to go and exercise. But the problem was, like, when I think about wearing the right clothes, the right gym shoes, I don't want to go. I don't want to be embarrassed. That's why I just stop." Notably, this concern had more to do with not wearing the "right" clothes because they were not available to this student due to financial constraints, than any limitations imposed by cultural or religious restrictions.

Similar to their male counterparts, the young women also gave examples of prejudice in their sport and physical recreation participation. A young Albanian student noted that: "We have some wonderful girls and we have some, I hate to say that, some really bad girls that, they

just don't like immigrants, who don't like me either. I don't know what the point of that is.”

This experience limited the physical education participation of at least one female Iraqi student. She commented, “When my friend that I usually play with is absent or something, I have to be alone because no one accepts me. I don't want to experience that again.”

The difficulties with English language reported by the students in this study correspond with Seat's (2000) observation that newcomer youth attributed a lack of English proficiency to their fear, confusion, and feelings of isolation and marginalization. In fact, this has been shown in previous research to be the most difficult aspect of adolescent immigrants trying to fit into their new home country (Kilbride et al., 2000; Kunz & Hanvey, 2000; Seat). Social exclusion based on lack of English language fluency appears to be a critical aspect of sport and physical recreation participation, and a barrier to successful settlement. Research has also shown that other constraining factors to the successful settlement of young, recent immigrants were their experiences with prejudice and discrimination based on race and cultural differences (Kilbride et al.; Kunz & Hanvey; Seat). The students in the current study likewise described their negative experiences with prejudice and discrimination, specifically in the sport and physical recreation setting.

Even though the young men had many of the same experiences with social exclusion based on language difficulty, lack of familiarity with the games, and prejudice, they seemed better able to overcome this difficulty than the girls, and just “get on with the game.” A Kosovar man commented, “We get that too [teasing from others]. I shake it off. You don't mean it. So even if they say something, I know it's just in fun.” Overcoming social exclusion also meant doing one's best to learn the language, the rules of the game, or the skills, and trying to fit in. As one Afghani male student explained,

I found it a little bit hard to get to know about the rules and to know what the coach says. At the beginning, when I came to Canada. . . I was finding it very hard. Because I felt, like, very alone because I wasn't able to communicate with other kids and to get to know what I feel about it. I knew the sports, I could learn, whatever, but when they used to say do this, do that, and then I wasn't able, so nobody would be my partner or in my group, so then I would be left alone myself. But now I find it easier because I get familiar with the language, I learn it, I know I'm getting better.

Even the young women commented on how boys were better at dealing with the factors that created a sense of social exclusion. During one of the focus groups an Iranian female commented, "I think the main reason is that boys get together much easier than girls." All the young women nodded in agreement with that statement, and an Iraqi female added, "Girls are selfish sometimes." Another Iranian female pointed out that, "The girls will tell you they don't like how you're walking, but the boys don't care about this stuff, they just get together." A young Albanian woman agreed that, "Boys don't care what kind of friends you have. They just say okay." A female Iraqi student in the group further stated:

The boys are so friendly with each other, they communicate with each other so good. Not like girls. Like, for me, I would love to go with boys more than girls. Because with boys you just go along with them so easy but with girls you have to understand her and get along with her.

The findings of this study indicate that the young men were better able to negotiate social exclusion and, thus, could maintain their involvement in sport and physical recreation, and accrue the benefits that seem to promote settlement. This corresponds with Scott and Scott's (1989) suggestion that that how one reacts to various aspects of a new **community** is a factor in successful integration into that **community**. It is not clear why the female students felt more constrained by, or were not as readily able to negotiate, the social exclusion brought on by language difficulties, lack of understanding of some games and activities, and discrimination against immigrants. The males may simply have been more motivated to do so, in order to "get back in the game." The focus group data suggest this contrast had more to do with differences

between male and female adolescents in general (i.e., the age group) (e.g., “girls are selfish sometimes,” “boys don’t care what kind of friends you have”), than anything specific to the female newcomers who participated in this study. For example, research has shown that females in particular felt constrained in their leisure participation because of cultural or religious background (e.g., Carrington et al., 1987; Dagkas & Benn, 2006; Livengood & Stodolska, 2004; Taylor, 2001; Tirone & Pedlar, 2000). However, the female students in this study did not indicate that cultural background or religion had any more of an influence on their ability to take part in sport and physical recreation than their male counterparts. The female Muslim students, for example, did not feel particularly constrained by their clothing requirements, nor by any limits on their participation in co-ed groups.

This finding may be unique to the students studied here, and may be due, in part, to the fact that the students’ schools were very accommodating to cultural and religious practices. For example, there were several reports of teachers and coaches being attuned to the unique needs of some of the students in this study, including providing alternative activities when Muslim youth were fasting. This argument is supported by the recent work of Dagkas and Benn (2006), who found that young Muslim women in the British school system felt far more constrained in their physical education participation because of their religious background than their counterparts in the Greek school system. Dagkas and Benn attributed this, at least in part, to differences in school policies and practices where, “the meeting of religious requirements was more problematic in the British [system] than the Greek [system]” (p. 32). Alternatively, as noted earlier, the limited constraints reported by the young Muslim women in the current study may reflect reluctance on their part to share this personal information in the focus group setting. Differences in how young male and female newcomers negotiate the social exclusion

experienced in sport and physical recreation is a worthy avenue for further research, following the work on leisure constraints negotiation by Jackson, Crawford and Godbey (1993) and Livengood and Stodolska (2004).

The young people also talked about the difference some of their teachers and coaches made in helping them overcome the difficulties that precipitated the social exclusion they experienced in sport and physical recreation. Some teachers took the time to make sure the recent immigrant students understood what was, for them, a new sport or physical activity. For instance, an Iraqi male commented, “There were three of us [ESL students] in the class only who didn’t know how to play [rugby]. We tried our best. The teacher taught us how to do it, and it became fun for us.” Students also described teachers who made a point of ensuring no one was excluded from participation:

They [mainstream students] didn’t even talk to me [at school]. But I liked the gym, it was fun. Because the teacher, he was a nice teacher. So he just made us in groups. He didn’t say go get groups, he just made them. (Iranian female)

Seat (2000) also found that teachers were a potentially positive force in helping young newcomers fit in, and played a key role in their settlement. Most of the young people in his study said they had open communication with their teachers, and the teachers understood the newcomers’ struggles. This seemed to be the case in the current study as well, with respect to the teachers trying to ensure the ESL students had a positive sport and physical education experience. However, the variable influence of teachers on students’ experiences was indicated by Dagkas and Benn’s (2006, p. 31) finding that, “open or closed attitudes of teachers towards Islam and Muslims. . . contributed to the positive or negative experiences encountered” by Greek and British female Muslim students in physical education. Nevertheless, the findings of

the current study suggest that sport provided an opportunity for these educational leaders to facilitate the integration of ESL students within a given activity and among their peers.

### Conclusions

The findings of this study indicate that sport and physical recreation can play a meaningful role in the settlement of young, recent immigrants to Canada. The narratives of the adolescent newcomers interviewed here reflect attitudes and experiences that are consistent with what have been identified in the literature as key factors in the immigrant settlement process (e.g., Rublee & Shaw, 1991; Scott & Scott, 1989; Seat, 2000; Stodolska & Alexandris, 2004; Taylor, 2001; Tirone & Pedlar, 2000).

The focus group participants described physical activity as an enjoyable, healthy leisure activity. As such, we may expect that it contributes to their sense of general well-being and life satisfaction, which Rublee and Shaw (1991) and Scott and Scott (1989) identified as indicative of successful integration into a new society. The young immigrants noted that the opportunity to engage with family was a valued aspect of sport and physical recreation participation. This may allow them to temporarily put aside, or perhaps even overcome, the stresses of home life and promote positive family relations that have been identified elsewhere as important to successful settlement (Scott & Scott; Seat, 2000; Tirone & Pedlar, 2000; Taylor, 2001). The opportunity to interact with old and new friends, from one's own ethnic group, other ethnic groups, and mainstream peers, through sport and physical recreation participation was particularly valued by the young newcomers. In another study, Seat found that adolescent immigrants valued these connections because they helped the teenagers to "fit in" and to feel accepted in their new country. Participating with friends and peers in a group setting, which is common in sport, was another valued aspect of this leisure time activity. In groups, whether an

organized team or an informal collection of friends, the opportunity to develop language skills and learn the culture of one's new country was heightened. The young, recent immigrants described sport and physical recreation as a site for improving their English, which has been recognized as a fundamental factor in successful settlement (Kilbride et al., 2000; Seat; Scott & Scott). This tended to happen, though, only when newcomers participated with friends and peers from other ethnic groups and mainstream society, where English is the common language. The findings of this study suggest that becoming oriented to the culture of mainstream society through sport and recreation participation also helps to provide recent immigrants with the cultural skills they need for successful settlement (Scott & Scott).

At the same time, sport and physical recreation were seen as a site for social exclusion that certainly counters, if not interrupts, the process of fitting in, getting along with others, and feeling comfortable in one's new environment. Consistent with Seat (2000), Kilbride et al. (2000), and Kunz and Hanvey (2000), the young, recent immigrants in this study felt socially excluded because of their language deficiency, unfamiliarity with many of the sports played in Canada, and prejudice on the part of their Canadian peers. However, the findings further revealed that teachers and coaches could be an important part of the young newcomers' sport and physical recreation experience given their ability to help overcome the barriers to social inclusion through sport.

The focus group interview data revealed some differences between male and female students. In particular, the young men and women had different reactions to the social exclusion they experienced as a result of participating in sport and physical recreation. The young women were more affected by social exclusion, while the young men were more likely to deal with it by trying to learn the language, the rules, or the skills required, and making an effort to fit in. The



focus groups provided evidence that social exclusion was likely a deterrent to participation for some, and prompted complete withdrawal from an activity for others. Nevertheless, the benefits of general well-being (particularly through participation in fun, social activities), developing language skills, and becoming more familiar with the mainstream culture may provide the impetus for programmers to help the young women and men successfully negotiate the constraints to settlement that may be experienced through sport and physical recreation.

#### *Implications for Settlement Policy and Programs*

The findings presented in this paper indicate that, for the most part, sport and physical recreation can facilitate the settlement of young, recent immigrants. Such activities must be planned to ensure that they are fun for the participants and that they promote physical health benefits that were identified as important to the youth in this study. They must provide opportunities for social interaction with family, friends, or both, and ideally take place in a group setting. Participation with friends and peers from other ethnic groups and from mainstream society is essential if English language development is one of the objectives of sport and physical recreation participation. Such leisure activities also provide an opportunity to learn about mainstream culture, including typical dress and other cultural nuances associated with sport and recreation. To ensure this particular objective is met, mainstream activities must be included in any programming, and it is essential that young newcomers understand the rules and skills involved in the games. Policy and programming related to sport and physical recreation in the settlement process must recognize the important role that leaders (i.e., teachers, coaches, instructors) may play in facilitating settlement by minimizing the experiences of social exclusion that seem likely to occur. This involves helping and guiding both the young newcomers and their mainstream peers. It is necessary to sensitize these leaders to the issues

identified by the young newcomers in this study; including, language barriers, lack of familiarity with the rules or skills of the game, the potential for group activities to be exclusionary, and discrimination by other students.

### *Suggestions for Future Research*

This paper presents some preliminary findings regarding the role of sport and physical recreation in the settlement of young, recent immigrants. In order to extend this area of inquiry, and verify some of the conclusions offered here, a more systematic investigation is recommended. Future research should set out to examine further the nexus between sport and physical recreation, key factors in the settlement process, and indicators of successful settlement. For example, the influence of sport and physical recreation participation on national identity, life satisfaction, and role performance (Scott & Scott, 1989), or, for young newcomers, simply fitting in and getting along with one's peers (Seat, 2000) should be investigated. An additional avenue for research is the examination of young newcomers' negotiation of the social exclusion that may be experienced with participation. Research in this area may also be extended by examining the role of sport and physical recreation in immigrant settlement from a social capital perspective.<sup>3</sup> Bourdieu (1985) defined social capital as a network of formal and informal relationships that may facilitate an individual or particularly a group's advancement in and contribution to a community or society. The importance of friends, family, and groups (teams) in sport and physical recreation participation identified in the current study suggests that these leisure activities may be an important avenue through which social capital can be built (see also Amara et al., 2004).

While our study did not differentiate between ethnic groups, future research with young, recent immigrants could also explore variations within a diverse sample that reflects a pluralistic

society such as Canada. In fact, Seat (2000) observed some variations in youth immigrant attitudes by ethnic group, while Stodolska and Alexandris (2004) found differences between the role of sport in the lives of Korean and Polish immigrants. A focus on collective rather than individual experiences does not take into account other bases of “intra-societal differences” (Scott & Scott, 1989, p. 14), such as ethnic group or other background factors, and sex or other demographic characteristics. Indeed, a limitation of the current study was the focus group methodology, where the collective **experience** may have been over-emphasized compared to specific **experiences** of some individuals or sub-groups of cultural minorities. We could refine our understanding of the role of sport and physical recreation in the immigrant settlement process by the individual to a greater extent. This can be done through personal interviews that may elicit more private narratives, and by considering variation in personal and sub-group factors that are purported to influence the settlement process (Scott & Scott). Building on the current paper, as well as the related work of Rublee and Shaw (1991) and Stodolska and Alexandris, future research may also explore further the role of sport and physical recreation participation in the **settlement** experience of other groups of recent immigrants, such as adults and women. Such research is important to give a voice to their experiences, and ideally lead to the development of **settlement** services that are sensitive to the needs and interests of newcomers.

Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Canada is an officially bilingual country (English and French), however, English is the mainstream language of focus throughout this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Self-reported cultural backgrounds of the ESL student participants included: Afghani, Albanian, Iraqi, Romanian, Muslim, Croatian, Korean, Yemeni, Serbian, Pakistani, Chinese, Iranian, Sudanese, Taiwanese, Eritrean, Greek, Kosovar, and Syrian. Self-reported first languages of the ESL student participants included: Afghani, Albanian, Farsi, Arabic, Kurdish, Croatian, Cantonese, Korean, Serbian, Assyrian, Persian, Tigrina, Greek, Sudanese, and Hungarian.

<sup>3</sup> We would like to thank one of the anonymous reviewers for making this suggestion.

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