

# FRESH VOICES

# REPORT 2013

## Fresh Voices Youth Advisory Team

A partnership of Vancouver Foundation and B.C.'s Representative for Children and Youth



vancouver  
foundation



REPRESENTATIVE FOR  
CHILDREN AND YOUTH

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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We, the members of the Fresh Voices Youth Advisory Team, would like to give a big thanks to the many people and organizations that have lent us their time, experience and leadership. We have worked hard to engage newcomer immigrant and refugee youth, who, after arriving from around the world, now try and create a sense of home in communities throughout British Columbia. More than 200 newcomer youth shared their stories with us, they deserve the most recognition. Thank you for sharing, we did our best to do justice to our conversation in the hopes that they could help inform policies and practices that impact our lives.

Many thanks are also due to organizations and allies who have supported this work, including Vancouver Foundation, B.C.'s Representative for Children and Youth, Burnaby Youth Hub, TruthFool Communications, Canadian Council for Refugees, Immigrant Services Society, MOSAIC, Central Vancouver Island Multicultural Society, Immigrant and Multicultural Services Society, Umoja, Langley Community Services Society, and Inter-Cultural Association of Greater Victoria. Along this list it is also important to recognize many people who have been involved in resistance and struggles to allow younger people to be leaders; and for those young people be involved in social change, particularly when coming from migrant journeys.

We want to thank each other, for the patience, honesty, laughter, tears, wisdom and pizza we shared with one another. We have worked hard, and we are proud of our efforts to make our communities stronger for all people. We invite you to learn more about our team members at the end of this report.

Last but not least, we would like to acknowledge and thank the many First Nations of B.C., whose unceded territories we visited, and on whose lands we now live.

Sincerely,

Fresh Voices Youth Advisory Team

## Message from Vancouver Foundation and the Representative for Children and Youth

Vancouver Foundation, in partnership with B.C.'s Representative for Children and Youth, is pleased to support the release of the 2013 Fresh Voices Report, offering insights drawn from a series of community dialogues and conversations between immigrant and refugee youth.

Fresh Voices is the product of countless hours of hard work and dedication by the 18 immigrant and refugee youth volunteers who make up the Fresh Voices Youth Advisory Team. These young leaders have engaged peers and allies from across the Province in meetings and conversations that captured the opportunities and challenges facing newcomers to Canada. The level of youth engagement in this project speaks to their pursuit of a stronger Canada, one where they can help contribute gifts and values to the school, community and immigration systems that are of such importance to all of us.

Their work has culminated in the release of this report and the 16 recommendations it contains, and the launch of their Make-it-Count campaign ([www.make-it-count.ca](http://www.make-it-count.ca)). Recommendations in this report provide thoughtful, sometimes tough, direction on proposed changes for policies and practices that would ease the barriers to settlement experienced by many newcomer children, youth and their families. If implemented, these recommendations will go a long way towards strengthening our communities by eliminating forms of discrimination, enhancing our sense of belonging and building cross-cultural awareness and understanding.

The young people who have contributed to this report have provided a valuable road map to create communities that are welcoming, inclusive and supportive of the diverse cultures that make up today's modern society. Their work speaks to the importance of creating opportunities for young people to work together, to articulate their own visions for change.

We hope this report leads to a better understanding of the challenges facing immigrant and refugee youth in British Columbia and leads to positive, constructive policy decisions on how we can build a better society for everyone, no matter what their country of origin.

Sincerely,



Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond  
Representative for Children and Youth



Kevin McCort  
President and CEO, Vancouver Foundation

# 1. INTRODUCTION

For immigrant and refugee youth, Canada offers much promise. The arrival and settlement process is, however, never easy. Both provincial and federal governments have policies and programs to ease the transition. However, immigrant and refugee youth often feel disconnected, undervalued, misrepresented and discriminated against by the very systems intended to help them.

In 2011, Vancouver Foundation and B.C.'s Representative of Children and Youth launched *Fresh Voices from Long Journeys*, an initiative to engage immigrant and refugee youth from across the province in dialogue and action. The ultimate goal was to improve the policies and practices that affect immigrant and refugee youths' sense of belonging in British Columbia and Canada as a whole.

To do this, Vancouver Foundation engaged an advisory group of immigrant and refugee youth and youth workers called the *Fresh Voices Youth Advisory Team (YAT)*. This was an innovative approach: while immigrant and refugee youth in Canada have previously been consulted on their settlement experiences, rarely have these processes been led by immigrant and refugee youth peers.



This report outlines the *Fresh Voices* process, key themes and recommendations that emerged, and reflections on the process. While the project dealt with the experiences of immigrant and refugee youth in British Columbia, many of the findings are relevant throughout Canada. This information is offered as a basis for moving forward with improving the lives of immigrant and refugee youth across the country.

## 2. ABOUT FRESH VOICES

The *Fresh Voices from Long Journeys* project was launched in 2011 by Vancouver Foundation and B.C.'s Representative of Children and Youth. Its initial goal was to produce the fourth annual Champions for Children and Youth Summit. Each Champions for Children and Youth Summit has a different focus; the 2011 Summit theme was on the experiences of immigrant and refugee youth.

In partnership with Vancouver Foundation, an 18-member Youth Advisory Team (YAT) of immigrant and refugee youth and youth workers was assembled. The YAT led the development of the Summit program content and dialogue space. At the Summit, more than 100 immigrant and refugee youth shared their experiences and talked about how to improve the well-being of their communities with public policy makers and other key stakeholders.

After the Summit, both the Vancouver Foundation and B.C.'s Representative for Children and Youth decided to continue supporting this work with immigrant and refugee youth, guided by conversations from the Summit. The Youth Advisory Team continued to provide oversight.

The YAT worked with Vancouver Foundation to organize smaller regional dialogues to share what had been learned to date and to further explore how government and other organizations could better serve immigrant and refugee communities. Four dialogues took place in Nanaimo, Victoria, Langley and Prince George in 2012. About 100 youth were consulted through the regional dialogues. YAT members also did presentations at other conferences and attended events to share their work and insights. In total, about 200 immigrant and refugee youth were directly consulted.

## 3. KEY THEMES

Four key themes emerged during conversations within the YAT and during the Fresh Voices community dialogue process. Although these themes overlap, they provided a useful framework for organizing the dialogues, and for reporting on the results of the process. These themes are:

- Immigration
- School and English Language Learning (formally known as English as a Second Language)
- Family
- Building Bridges and Working in Solidarity (immigrant and refugees connecting and building relationships with Canadian-born and indigenous communities)

All the quotations below are from dialogue participants, except where noted.

### Immigration

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*“Immigration is not easy. It costs a lot and you don’t know if they accept you. It puts a lot of stress and uncertainty on families and affects emotional well-being and performance of youth in schools.”*

**“[IN CANADA] THE WORD ‘REFUGEE’ IS LOADED; PEOPLE DON’T WANT TO BE LABELED AS THIS.”**

While transitioning to Canada is challenging for most newcomers, the experience is substantially different for newcomers with different migration pathways. For example, newcomers can arrive as permanent residents, family sponsorships, students, government assisted refugees and refugee claimants. People in each category have different resources and supports available to them. Although refugees are one of the smaller of the migration categories in terms of total numbers, through the community dialogues, they stood out as particularly vulnerable, and a large proportion of the dialogue discussion related to refugee issues.

An important backdrop to community dialogues was the passage of Bill C-31, which changed Canada’s refugee determination system. There were widespread concerns that faster determinations and designated “safe” countries of origin would effectively deny fair hearings for refugee claimants. There were also concerns about mandatory detention for “irregular arrivals” or those suspected of links to smuggling operations. These changes heightened anxieties and uncertainty for many of the youth who participated in the dialogues who were directly affected by these changes or had friends or community members who were affected.

The amount of paperwork and time that families needed to navigate the immigration process before coming to Canada was a concern for many immigrants, but was a particular issue for refugees. As one participant said: *“How can you survive in a refugee camp for 11 years while you are waiting to come?”*

Refugee claimant youth expressed how the difficulties of the immigration process and the amount of paperwork contributed to their families splitting up once they arrived despite the fact that they were still working through obtaining their status. Youth also pointed out how difficult it was to process the refugee application or get immigration papers if their families arrived in Canada without permanent status.

Refugee claimants also found it particularly difficult to navigate the immigration system. It is perceived as confusing, complex, and unfair, and not working well. Some refugees expressed concerns about the language barrier many refugees face when they initiate the process. In the words of one youth participant: *“You don’t find the words to speak up for the things that are wrong, we can’t advocate for ourselves and it has been a barrier in the immigrant process.”*



More broadly, some newcomers to Canada face what Youth Advisory Team members heard described as discrimination and systemic racism. Some of the youth equated not being born in Canada to being considered a second class citizen:

*“When you tell people you are immigrant, (you are) automatically regarded as a second class citizen... it shouldn’t bring people down just because you immigrated.”*

*“I would never share my story in spaces with white people, because they have that image that they (back in my home country) are dying of hunger. I don’t feel comfortable sharing because they see me as someone who is taking their tax money. That is really offensive.”*

*“[In Canada] the word ‘refugee’ is loaded; people don’t want to be labeled as this.”*

Youth felt that the immigration process creates a negative idea of “refugees”, and even the perception that some people are “better refugees” than others.



Youth ideas on how to improve the system including ensuring that Immigrants and refugees have the right to organize, express their opinions and vote for things that affect them. Youth also wanted to reorganize programs that provide volunteers to help newcomers to Canada. They felt volunteers should have experience with the issues facing immigrant and refugee families in Canada as well as training. It was important to them that volunteers demonstrate a strong commitment to both the individual person or family they’re matched with, and that family’s migrant community.

The youth also felt there is a need to create more spaces such as the one provided by this project where people can talk about issues and encourage leadership coming from immigrant and refugee youth.

When asked about positive experiences, the youth identified peer support programs and services where they could connect to other immigrants and refugees with similar experiences. They also acknowledged the “hosts” programs, where volunteers helped guide the process of settlement for the youth. Peer support and interactions with other immigrant families were beneficial because they demonstrated how others overcame similar difficulties. This inspired confidence in youth that their own situation could improve. Although participants were grateful for these experiences they also expressed concern with regards to the limited time these programs were offered. *“The program is only 6 months long.”*

## School and English Language Learning

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*“I speak many languages....  
in my house we speak three languages.”*

*“ESL classes are not effective enough.  
I realize there is money going into the  
program but I don’t find it helpful.”*

For newcomer children, youth and families, the public education system plays a critical role in their ability to settle, adapt, build skills, networks and support. School experiences, particularly related to English Language Learning or ELL (also known as English as a Second Language or ESL) was a prominent focus within all community dialogues. While youth have appreciated finding helpful allies in teachers, support workers and students, the YAT consistently heard critical feedback related to ELL. This isn’t surprising: language barriers affect confidence, self-esteem and can affect a student’s ability to participate in school and in the broader community.



**“I GET TO EAT ALONE, I TALK TO NO ONE... IN THE PHILIPPINES  
I TALK TO EVERYONE BECAUSE I’M FRIENDLY.”**

In 2011, the BC Ministry of Education took the positive step of changing “English as a Second Language” to “English Language Learning” to recognize that, for many learners, English is in fact their third, fourth, or even fifth language. However, it is still difficult for many students to receive recognition for the other languages they speak. Immigrant and refugee youth feel the school system here is not really inclusive of other languages, and that the underlying message is that they need to speak English only and it is the only language valued in Canada.

At the same time, these youth feel they need to maintain a connection with their families and cultures.

*“I want to be able to interact with my grandma and also improve my English.”* Some feel conflicted: *“I feel torn between English and Arabic. Sometimes I miss Arabic so much and I feel like there is a battle in my head, as if I want to improve my English skills I would have to stop speaking Arabic and the other way around and in school or in Canada there is no space for me to develop both.”*

Some participants noted that ELL students were not provided with any orientation regarding classrooms, schedules, washrooms, lunch, even at the beginning of school. One person said, *“It would be helpful if there was someone whose job was to help immigrant and refugee youth.”* In general, newcomer youth would appreciate a range of resources to help orient them to new learning systems and expectations, including adult allies, peer mentorship, navigation supports and access to on-line and hard copy materials, preferably in their first language.

Many young people expressed concerns on how current supports can worsen segregation and isolation and increase discrimination at school which in turn creates loneliness. Youth said, *“Being bothered or singled out because of being different is discrimination.”* Youth reported being told things like, *“You should get back to your own country,”* or *“They should deport you.”* One participant noted: *“I get to eat alone, I talk to no one... in the Philippines I talk to everyone because I’m friendly.”*

When the youth participants were asked how to improve the school system they talked about having more inclusive policies and raising awareness about discrimination. They also think that the school system needs a better understanding of the different needs of people who have migrated through different pathways. For example, refugees have very different needs from international students, but they are often treated the same.

For refugee claimant youth, obtaining access to the school system was difficult. Schools generally do not allow newcomers to Canada to study if they lack official status or documentation, although some schools did accept students if their papers were in process. Some unaccompanied minors were not allowed to attend school. The youth consulted pointed out that education is a fundamental right and there needs to be policy to support students with unclear immigration status.

The youth also proposed schools could give credits toward graduation for courses, which could change the perception that ELL/ESL courses are of little value to the student. Teachers should also be required to obtain cross cultural awareness training to be an ELL teacher.

Some youth participants had good experiences at school and with individual teachers, community workers and/or Settlement Workers in Schools staff who were very supportive. Some students also mentioned extracurricular and after school activities which helped them build relationships, friendships and a sense of belonging. Even so, they felt more spaces to talk and share experiences with other ‘immigrant’ communities were needed. They think that Canadian society also needs to learn more about immigrant and refugee youth issues, backgrounds, experiences, languages and cultures.

## Family

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Participants acknowledged the importance of family connection and feelings of belonging as essential to their wellbeing. Some of them had the experience of their family being separated because of the immigration process.

*“I was separated from my father and for years I didn’t see him... My life became so much easier when the immigration issues of my family were solved.”*

Some had family or relatives who arrived before they did which they found helpful, as those family members were able to support them with their transition. For others, who did not know anyone or had no connection here, it was important to find a place like a community group or church in order to create a sense of belonging.

*“In Victoria the Intercultural Association supported my mom who is single. They really helped me and my mom; they send translators for government things, really good job in supporting.”*

**“IF YOU DON’T HAVE RELATIVES  
IT IS VERY HARD TO SURVIVE  
IN CANADA, NOT ENOUGH SERVICES  
WHERE WE LIVE...”**

Youth also commented that some community services were helpful as well as spaces to connect with other immigrant and refugee families that were here longer that could guide them and support them through the acculturation process.

Youth whose families were not in Canada had to depend on government programs and grow up fast: *“If you don’t have relatives it is very hard to survive in Canada, not enough services where we live...”*

Language barriers make it more difficult to navigate the system for families and access services like health care and/or others. One of the participants said, *“My mom didn’t speak the language and we didn’t know anyone, she got sick and depressed and it took us six months to get a Care Card.”*

The language barrier also made it difficult to make friends, participate in the community, form a sense of belonging, and take part in social networking. At the beginning, it is very hard for immigrant families. One teen said: *“My mom is really friendly but here because of the language she has difficulties making friends.”*

## **“MY MOM WANTS ME TO WEAR WHAT SHE WANTS AND NOT WHAT OTHER CANADIAN YOUTH WEAR.”**

In some cases, youth were challenged by changes in family dynamics and roles that occurred after coming to Canada. Youth found it easier to learn the new language and culture which shifted the power structure in the family. Some youth began taking on more responsibilities at home, often becoming like *“heads of the family.”* These changes in the family dynamics and roles were difficult to deal with. They often created tension among family members and a generational crisis. In some cases it was expressed in disagreements like this:

*“My mom wants me to wear what she wants and not what other Canadian youth wear.”*

*“I became the head of the family to support with translation and navigating the system here affected my performance at school.”*

Immigrant and refugee youth said they often have to interpret for teachers and parents and it puts a lot of responsibility and pressure on them. It is hard for youth to support their parents to navigate the system when they arrive. Parents learn at a different pace than youth or sometimes need to get a job and do not have the opportunity to learn and speak English.

These numerous changes create pressure and emotional hardship when trying to adapt and relate to each other. Many families experienced increased stress and mental and emotional health issues. The challenges are faced both internally within the family and the individual and externally between families/individuals and the outside world.

### **Challenges external to family included:**

- language barriers,
- difficulties navigating the system,
- challenges adapting to new processes,
- culture shock,
- lack of community and
- discrimination and racism.

### **Challenges internal to family and within the individual included:**

- changes in family roles.
- power shifts,
- identity crisis,
- sense of powerlessness,
- depression,
- anxiety and
- sense of worthlessness.

Poverty is another limitation affecting some new immigrants and many refugee families. Settlement support is modest, and doesn't meet basic needs for newly arrived refugee families. Government-assisted refugees are required to repay medical and transportation costs associated with their travel to Canada, which further undermines their ability to escape patterns of poverty. Many youth consulted reported it difficult to have enough food for their families. They encountered barriers to getting around the city, making connections, and networking since they found transportation very expensive.

When parents are finally able to get jobs, youth reported they were frequently under-employed because their credentials and qualifications are not recognized by potential employers.

*“My parents can't find appropriate work so both have to work long hours for low pay in jobs that don't match their skills. It makes it hard to be together as family. My sister is surprised when we eat together.”*

*“We came to Canada with nothing and we lived in a very small apartment in a rough area in town. My parents had to work minimum wage in order to pay rent and support us.”*

*“My parents work all day then have to go learn language after work, builds stress.”*

The youth noted that it is important for families to have access to affordable child care services so that parents can study, access training, or attend work. Obtaining employment is another limitation for parents because they often need Canadian experience before being considered for a job. The youth spoke of a need to change the requirements for getting a job so that parents' existing credentials are recognized.

According to the youth, their families also face serious challenges in dealing with changes in roles, values, identity and gender dynamics. Youth suggested establishing safe community spaces free of racism and discrimination and spaces where immigrants and refugees could discuss these issues. Spaces for women were specifically identified.

Another repeated recommendation was the importance of special resources for queer immigrants and refugees. Queer youth often feel isolated both within their own community and in spaces for LGBTQ youth. *“It is not safe to be queer,”* explained one participant. Existing LGBTQ services have limited capacity to support immigrant and refugee concerns, and settlement services often seem limited in their ability to support meaningful community conversations and advocacy work focused on LGBTQ issues.

Youth would like to see additional training and professional development for teachers, public servants and service providers, to enhance their awareness and understanding of issues that immigrant and refugee families face. A better understanding of how racism and discrimination surfaces inside and outside of the classroom would give them more tools to create more welcoming and inclusive schools and communities. Immigrant and refugee youth expressed a desire to help inform how this work could occur.



## Building Bridges and Working in Solidarity

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*“Canada is not going to be a successful multicultural country until it builds bridges between different communities.”*

*“We need to hold ...safe spaces for people to mix — immigrant, indigenous, and Canadian.”*

Youth were asked, “What is working to create bridges between cultures including Canadian born and indigenous people?” They found great value in programs and projects developed by multicultural organizations where refugees and immigrants can access services and resources in safe contexts. Youth pointed out how valuable it has been to have the opportunity to participate in *Fresh Voices*. They also placed great value on having volunteers and mentors for new immigrants and opportunities for building community connections.

A common experience for refugee and immigrant youth are feelings of isolation and not belonging. “Back home” they felt a sense of community, had strong relationships, and had family and friends that were supportive. As newcomers to Canada they expressed feeling alone, isolated, strange, alien, and unwelcome:



**“MOST OF MY FRIENDS ARE FROM OTHER COUNTRIES, WITH THEM I DON’T FEEL JUDGED.”**

*“To feel belonging, you need to have connections. But here not enough spaces to make these connections and meet new people.”*

The culture shock for youth newcomers can be overwhelming. Many youth perceive that in Canada culture is more individualistic, everyone is busy, and people here are not flexible. They observe that youth do not communicate a lot face to face, and instead use cell phones, technology, and social media. Many felt they were stereotyped and developed feelings of inadequacy and alienation:



*“I don’t have any Canadian born friends, I am shy to make friends and speak with other Canadians and that they won’t understand me ....they don’t even know where my country is.”*

These feelings can be counterbalanced when youth maintain strong connections with people from their own communities or with other new immigrants and refugees who live and understand similar experiences:

*“We feel safe when we hang out with our own communities.”*

*“Most of my friends are from other countries, with them I don’t feel judged.”*

*“I socialize with the people of my culture because of the stereotypes created like about terrorism.”*

When asked about ideas to improve the isolation of refugees and new immigrants and how to create bridges between communities, participants were eager to provide ideas. In particular they identified a strong connection between themselves and indigenous people in Canada. They felt that that many new immigrant and refugee communities “... *have similar community values that could set a common ground to connect with indigenous communities.*”

Participants expressed a desire to have safe spaces where people of different cultural backgrounds can mix. One idea they proposed was that immigrants, indigenous people, and other Canadians could meet at an Interfaith Concert, where people can learn about each other’s histories both similar and different and where there can be a mutual acknowledgment that allows healing and building a new collective identity.

Youth believe that Canadians should learn more about other communities, histories and cultures to help prevent discrimination and to create more awareness, understanding and empathy with newcomers. At the same time, they think that is very important to promote the understanding of First Nations’ history. The youth consulted felt that new immigrants need to learn what First Nations and indigenous people have been through, because there is a disconnect between historic facts and the perception of indigenous people in Canada.



Youth also think that politicians should take more time out from their offices and communicate directly with new immigrant and refugee communities to develop an understanding of how people are living. Having this kind of close communication could allow them to make policies that meet community needs.

The youth consulted consider it very important to have more spaces for dialogues such as *Fresh Voices*, as well as spaces for connection and intercultural sharing, dialogues and workshops that foster understanding.

## 4. WELCOMING DIVERSITY:

### Recommendations to Enhance Belonging For Immigrant and Refugee Youth and their Communities

Following the 2011 *Fresh Voices from Long Journeys: Insights of Immigrant and Refugee Youth Summit* in Vancouver, four regional dialogue sessions were held in 2012 in Nanaimo, Victoria, Langley and Prince George. The goal of these dialogue sessions was to hear about particular challenges that immigrant and refugee youth face living in regions other than metro Vancouver.

Most of the young people spoke of the need for improvements to systems of support, and better outcomes for immigrant and refugee youth. At the same time, there was an overall feeling of gratitude for being in Canada. As one participant explained, *“I feel lucky despite the flaws, and I am thankful that you listened.”* The conversations themselves were encouraging to the participants; youth felt that speaking about their experiences could possibly lead to better outcomes for others.

From these conversations, the Fresh Voices Youth Advisory Team identified 16 recommendations for how government and community organizations could better address the challenges that immigrant and refugee youth commonly face living in B.C. These recommendations are meant to help strengthen our communities by eliminating forms of discrimination and stigma, better valuing our diversity, enhancing our sense of belonging and inclusion, and building cross-cultural awareness and understanding.

#### Addressing Challenges in Schools

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*“Schools for youth are the most important place to build all the bridges. If schools fail to build them, not much can be done.” — YAT member*

British Columbia’s public education system is central to academic development; it also strengthens the sense of belonging and inclusion for immigrant and refugee youth. However, immigrant and refugee youth often feel stigmatized, devalued and discriminated against within the education system, by both policies and practices that shape their school experiences. Participants identified a set of key recommendations they felt would better support their academic progress, social inclusion and integration into Canadian society through their school experiences.

**Recommendation 1: Allow English Language Learning (ELL) courses — also known as English as a Second Language (ESL) courses — to count towards high school graduation.**

During the dialogue sessions, youth said there was a stigma attached to being an “English as a Second Language student.” Many feel they are considered less intelligent because of this label. This can be reinforced when ELL/ESL classes are located on the geographic fringe of school grounds, when ELL/ESL teachers lack specific training, or when ELL/ESL classroom activities offer limited language learning.

A source of frustration for many immigrant and refugee youth is that ELL/ESL coursework does not count towards graduation credits. The youth believe that recognizing and attributing credits towards graduation for these courses would reduce some of the present stigma associated with being an ELL/ESL student. It would create greater incentive for students and teachers to take English language learning more seriously, and it would help ELL/ESL students graduate with other students their age.

**Recommendation 2: Implement a special credit program for languages spoken at home (not otherwise taught in the regular school system).**

One of the key recommendations from the Summit in 2011 was a call to change the term “English as a Second Language” to “English Language Learning”, in order to acknowledge that English is often the third, or sometimes the fourth or fifth language immigrant and refugee youth acquire. This recommendation was implemented by the BC Ministry of Education in 2011.

As a next step, crediting students for languages spoken at home would help acknowledge the complexity of the students’ academic challenges and would value their ability to speak additional languages.



Some school districts have been designing language learning curriculum tailored to a range of first languages; it would be useful for others to build on learning or success in this area.

**Recommendation 3: Increase opportunities for immigrant-facilitated dialogues in schools, and ensure participation from senior education, government and community leaders.**

Immigrant and refugee youth want to have their stories heard and valued. They also want to improve systems intended to support their learning and school experiences. It is important to have participation from adult decision-makers in order to improve understanding and have positive influence on policies and practices that impact young people in schools. Creating more frequent opportunities for structured conversation and dialogue about people’s experiences would enable immigrant and refugee youth to talk about their migration journeys and their place of origin, facilitate their integration, and help them learn in an environment where they feel understood and supported.

**Recommendation 4: Provide anti-oppression, anti-racism and cultural awareness training to teachers and other school staff who work with immigrant and refugee students and communities.**

This was one of the strongest recommendations that emerged from the youth participants. Teachers and school staff are primary contacts for students, and can dramatically affect their learning and sense of belonging and inclusion. When teachers and school officials expressed awareness and interest in the well-being of immigrant and refugee communities, participants reported feelings of belonging and increased academic success. Conversely, when the experiences with teachers and other school staff were negative, the effects were devastating.

Having relevant training, professional development and community linkages so school staff understand issues relating to immigrant and refugee communities is critical. Immigrant and refugee students are willing, open and ready to work with school officials to identify solutions and improvements such as cultural awareness training and other tools to better support their complex needs.

**Recommendation 5: Include more immigrants and refugees on the governing bodies of school districts, parent advisory committees, and student councils.**

Immigrant and refugee students see high school education as vital to their long-term success. However, students from immigrant and refugee families reported feeling under-represented in the decision-making bodies or the spaces of influence in schools. Inclusion at every level, from including newcomer voices in student council and other school extra-curricular activities, to encouraging schools and school districts to reach out and engage the parents of immigrant and refugee students, would support these students in fully accessing educational opportunities.

**Recommendation 6: Ensure ELL/ESL testing, assessment, placement and academic guidance is consistent across B.C.**

Dialogue participants shared stories of wide variation in assessment, placement and academic guidance. When changing schools or districts, they would be assessed at different English levels, and/or counseled to pursue less academic courses. This can have a significant impact on their academic path and eventual career options.

To be fair to all students, policies and practices that guide how ELL/ESL students are tested, assessed and placed need to be consistent across B.C.

**Recommendation 7: Develop mentorship programs where older immigrant and refugee young adults support younger peers to overcome difficulties and navigate the system.**

Youth in the dialogues described how useful it was when they encountered someone like them who had similar experiences. They believe schools should be supported to implement programs where members of immigrant and refugee communities can support school students, staff and their settlement programs. This could be done in collaboration with programs already existing within the education system, such as Settlement Workers in Schools program and Multicultural Liaison workers.

## Addressing Challenges for Youth and their Families

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**Recommendation 8: Promote intergenerational spaces to talk about the impact changes in roles and responsibilities have on traditional family values, dynamics and identities – particularly when youth seem to become the “head of the families” or key caregivers.**

The immigration experience often reshapes dynamics of cultural values, identities and power relationships between generations.

Youth often see themselves caught in between the needs of their family and their individual needs. A relatively common experience for immigrant and refugee young people is to become key brokers of information and knowledge within their families, and take on many of “head-of-household” responsibilities. Many youth reported juggling tasks that include serving as interpreters, accompanying older family members to social service or medical appointments, completing paperwork, dealing with phone, cable and utilities, and answering the phone.

They also witness and/or support the physical and mental well-being of parents and grandparents who may also be struggling in their settlement process. This can place added burdens of stress and pressure on young people who are also in the process of learning how to be a youth in Canada.

Community programs and services would be more effective if they acknowledged and supported youth dealing with these issues.

**Recommendation 9: Provide support to young adults in families from newcomer backgrounds to advance their education and employment goals.**

Many immigrant and refugee families face socio-economic and cultural challenges. While families are trying to find employment, pay off transportation loans, navigate the immigration process, and deal with varying levels of post-traumatic stress, they often also have to learn a new language, and familiarize themselves to new cultural norms. Finishing high school as adults or pursuing post-secondary education opportunities are important to immigrant and refugee youth, but given the immediacy of financial pressures at home, often seem out of reach. Expanding availability of scholarships and financial support for immigrant and refugees as they pursue school and training opportunities would help overcome some of the challenges they face when trying to support their families.

**Recommendation 10: Develop and provide specific program services for refugee youth, young girls and queer immigrants and refugees.**

Participants recognized the challenges that come with trying to represent and include as much diversity as possible. But many young participants and stakeholders spoke of the importance of focusing some special efforts for refugees, queer immigrants and young women. Many youth spoke of the stigma attached to the word “refugee” or “queer” within immigrant and refugee communities as well as within the Canadian society. It was suggested that there is a need to have more dialogues to deconstruct these stigmas and develop specific services targeting the needs of these specific populations within the immigrant and refugee community.

## **Addressing Challenges to Immigration and Family Issues**

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**Recommendation 11: Speed up family reunification efforts by enabling provincial staff to inform and influence federal immigration decision-making timelines.**

Family unification was identified as a significant issue by the youth at the dialogue sessions. Participants spoke of how being separated from their parents for a long time affected the relationship within their families and communities.

There are currently few opportunities to communicate the hardships that accompany family separations to federal immigration officials. Youth felt provincial services and public servants who work with minors should be better able to influence the speed of federal immigration decisions, particularly as they relate to family reunification efforts.

Immigration policy in Canada is inherently situated and understood as a federal matter, but the actual process of immigration and matters of resettlement are very localized. Adaptation and integration are experienced at a local level, within the cities where newcomer families are resettled. Most integration support work is led at the local level with provincial and municipal governments and non-profit organizations.

**Recommendation 12: Create better pre-departure and post-arrival orientation resources for immigrant and refugee youth.**

For many immigrant and refugee youth, a large part of their lives are interrupted and or take place in exile during migration, displacement and resettlement processes. Additionally, migration is often a decision made by adults and/or parents. While the number of refugee youth between 14 and 18 years old settling or resettling in Canada is increasing, Canada only has pre-departure orientation programs for adults, and limited post-arrival orientation resources tailored to the unique needs of children and youth.

Better in-person and online orientation resources in first languages would help young people prepare for settlement and attachment in Canada more quickly.

**Recommendation 13: All children and youth in Canada should have access to essential services such as education and health care, as outlined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child.**

Canada is a signatory to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states that children have the right to basic services such as education and health care. However, some children of refugee claimants and asylum-seekers cannot access these services for long periods in Canada while their refugee claims are being assessed. The immigrant and refugee youth consulted felt that education and health policies should provide access to services that support essential development regardless of immigration status.

## **Addressing Challenges by Building Bridges**

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**Recommendation 14: Federal, provincial and municipal funding and practices should strengthen the ability of cultural groups to come together to support themselves, such as peer mentorship programs for youth.**

Many participants in the dialogue sessions expressed their feeling of wanting to connect with 'Canadians'. At the same time, they also spoke of the stress and challenge that comes with navigating different cultures and systems. Many spoke of the big difference it made when there was someone from their own culture and language that was supporting them. This facilitated their participation in Canadian society. Regardless of who you are, where you are from, or what language you speak, it is easier to navigate a new system when someone with a closer experience to your own is supporting you through the process.

**Recommendation 15: Federal, provincial and municipal funding should be allocated towards supporting conversations and spaces for diverse cultural groups among both self-identified cultural groups and other mixed groups.**

It is important to understand who you are, where you come from and to connect with others from different places and journeys. During the dialogue sessions, youth suggested that the B.C. government should support workshops and forums for different cultural groups coming together to learn about each other's journeys, particularly from indigenous people in Canada. Many spoke of the need to learn from the First Peoples of this land and how their experiences can inform new immigrants on how to better treat each other and others to come.

**Recommendation 16: Government agencies and social services organizations must take more action to recruit, hire, train and promote people from immigrant and refugee backgrounds for key decision-making positions.**

Youth spoke of the importance of seeing members of their communities occupy leadership roles in government, schools, and social service agencies – whether as teachers, trustees, councillors, managers or board members.

Boards and staff of Canadian institutions – particularly public and non-profit agencies whose mandates include providing social and cultural supports to immigrant and refugee communities – need to better reflect Canada’s diversity. There should be more efforts to recruit, hire, train and promote immigrants and refugees, particularly for senior management or key decision-making positions.

## 5. REFLECTIONS ON THE FRESH VOICES PROCESS

*Fresh Voices* broke new ground in having immigrant and refugee youth lead such a significant consultation process. The youth identified six aspects of the process that differentiated it from other youth consultation projects they had been involved in:

- Youth engagement, focused on immigrant and refugee communities,
- Youth-adult partnership,
- Coordinators/facilitators with strong community connections,
- Local partnerships,
- Grassroots and institutional partnerships, and
- Taking risks.

### Youth Engagement

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Members of the immigrant and refugee community have said that in order for them to be involved and meaningfully represented, they need safe spaces where they can articulate their own experiences and realities. That is why throughout the *Fresh Voices* planning and facilitation the focus was on engaging immigrant and refugee youth.

The dialogues were led, and mostly attended, by immigrant and refugee youth, with preference given to racialized immigrants and refugees. If possible, they were attended as well by youth allies (non-racialized or non-immigrants) who wanted to support immigrant and refugee communities. Adults from any background were welcomed, but focus was on the experiences and ideas of immigrant and refugee youth. Every dialogue that took place, in large or smaller group discussions, and the presentations done at conferences and events were led by members of the YAT. The focus on having immigrant and refugee youth lead the process was innovative; most existing programs have immigrant and refugee youth simply receiving services.

### Youth-Adult Partnership

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Both the YAT and adult allies wanted the dialogue project to be led and guided by young people. However, the project also aimed to change policy and improve the provincial and federal systems and services serving immigrant and refugee communities. Working with adults increased the capacity to affect the system when developing recommendations and steps to follow up on (adults bridge policy language and facilitate relationships with others in the system.) However, to ensure that adults would not become the centre of attention, guidelines were developed and adults were often asked to be witnesses of the conversations and limit their questions and comments.

Young adults who were youth workers and from immigrant backgrounds were also an integral part of the YAT. They provided youth with emotional and practical support, became a bridge for other community processes, and provided critical awareness and understanding of key issues in diverse communities.

## **Coordinator/Facilitator with Strong Community Connections**

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The project had two overall coordinators. Coordination tasks included booking spaces, food, transportation, contacting parents and outreach. However, when planning meetings with the youth, the coordinators ensured that the ideas and experiences at the centre were coming from the youth, and that the direction and implementation process of dialogues and events were led by the YAT. The Vancouver Foundation and B.C.'s Representative for Children and Youth attended the meetings knowing that their role was to support the youths' experiences and ideas.

## **Local Partnerships**

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Although both B.C.'s Representative for Children and Youth and the Vancouver Foundation are institutions with provincial mandates and have relationships throughout the province, involving people on the frontlines working with immigrant and refugee youth in specific regions helped address local needs and challenges within each community and engage local youth.

## **Grassroots and Institutional Partnerships**

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The partnership between the grassroots immigrant and refugee community (voiced by the YAT) and the institutions of B.C.'s Representative for Children and Youth and the Vancouver Foundation was crucial to the success of the project.

Having the YAT plan the Summit and dialogues ensured that process aligned with youth engagement principles and represented grassroots community values. Having B.C.'s Representative for Children and Youth and the Vancouver Foundation supporting and being present at every step ensured that grassroots voices will be heard in a broader context.

## **Taking a risk**

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Everyone involved with this project took risks. B.C.'s Representative for Children and Youth and the Vancouver Foundation took risks by letting young people make decisions and recommendations that may not have been consistent with those organizations' priorities. The youth took risks sharing their personal stories publicly. Most people involved feel that the risks paid off, in important conversations, learnings, and relationships developed.



## 6. CONCLUSION

This report documents a stage in an ongoing process of learning about immigrant and refugee youth issues and about how young people can better influence policy and program development. We hope it will inform policy makers and policy changers and lead to more effective programs and services for immigrant and refugee youth.

Meanwhile, *Fresh Voices* has already had significant positive effects. Being supported by institutions such as Vancouver Foundation and B.C.'s Representative for Children and Youth was extremely empowering for the immigrant and refugee youth involved in the *Fresh Voices* process. By providing opportunities for important but rarely-held conversations, this process also created strong bonds with community members throughout the province. Many young people were also inspired to continue doing similar work with peers or with elected officials and public servants.

At the same time, this process enabled those institutions to build their capacity for engaging with immigrant and refugee youth. *Fresh Voices from Long Journeys* provides a model for how larger institutions can support grassroots approaches, reflect the needs of diverse communities, and ultimately provide more efficient and effective programs and services to all British Columbians.

## 7. YOUTH ADVISORY TEAM

### **Afeef Ahamed Hifzur Rahuman**

Afeef was born in Puttalam, Sri Lanka . He moved to Canada in 2008 with his family. He likes travelling, playing with friends and reading. As part of his community involvement Afeef joined the Youth Advisory Team in 2012 and has worked with NuYu MOSAIC. He recently graduated from high school and his future goal is to be a successful artist.

### **Bakir Al-Humaimidi**

Bakr was born in October 26<sup>th</sup> 1995 in Baghdad - Iraq. He has had struggles but also good times in life. He feels determined to fulfill his goals, have good friends, and love his family.

When Bakr came to Canada in 2010, he faced adversity like many other newcomers. Not only understanding lessons at schools and communicating with other people, but it was also very tough to get used to the cultural differences. To overcome challenges Bakr got involved in extracurricular activities, where he was able to meet people who shared his for love in Music and Math. That and the opportunity to meet more people at the Vancouver Foundation and joined the YAT (Youth Advisory Team) at the age of 16 have helped him progressed in life.

### **Catherine Yorgoro**

Catherine was born in Nigeria before relocating to Benin. In 2009 she immigrated to Canada with her family where she attended and graduated from Holy Cross Regional High School. She is currently a First Year General Studies student at Douglas College. Catherine is an easy going, fun loving and energetic individual. She is funny, hardworking, a team player, and spontaneous but also disciplined in every sense.

### **Dina Ganan Pérez**

Dina comes from Colombia and joined the YAT in Grade 10. When she came to Canada Dina lived in Montreal for three years. After that, Dina and her family moved to Vancouver to learn English and expand their opportunities for education and employment. She likes Canada. She feels it is a beautiful country and living here makes her feel happy because it gives her the opportunity to help her loved ones and develop herself as a professional. Dina graduated from high school and is looking towards being a source of change in her community.

### **Diego Cardona Ospina**

Diego arrived in Canada in 2005 with his mom and sister. He was a refugee victim of Colombia's armed conflict and forced displacement by illegal groups. Diego joined the YAT when he was 15 years old and is currently attending Sir Winston Churchill Secondary. He is a graduate of the Multicultural Youth Circle Program, a current member of the Action Team, and part of the Youth Philanthropy Council of Vancouver Foundation.

In 2011 Diego was the co-founder of a youth-led program call Latin Diversity which provides newcomer Latin American youth with a safe learning space in their integration process. He currently spends a lot of his time doing work around issues such as youth engagement, immigrant and refugee youth inclusion and social inequality.

### **Marlio Herrera Lira**

Marlio was 14 years old when he joined the YAT. He is from Veracruz, Mexico and has been in Canada for about three years. He is currently studying in Grade 11 in LA Matheson Secondary School in Surrey. Marlio likes trying new things and enjoys doing a little bit of everything. He likes to help people, working for human rights, global issues and volunteering in his school and community. His passions and hobbies are music (playing the trumpet), reading and making short films. Through this process Marlio has learned the importance of team work, leadership and presentation skills, and what a group of people are capable of. For the future he wants to found a Hispanic Friendship Club in his school for new comers from Latin America, a peer support group in a friendly and safe environment.

### **Mustafa Almashhadni**

Mustafa came originally from Iraq but lived in Syria for several years before coming to Canada. He joined the YAT when he was 14 years old and enjoys playing soccer and wrestling, among other sports. He attends Guildford Park Secondary School in Surrey. He is happy with his mother's decision to come to Canada, even though he misses his friends and the rest of his family, because he does not feel that Iraq is safe for them at the moment.

### **Nay Bu Taw**

Most of her early life was spent in refugee camps. The first citizenship she held was Canadian and she is proud of it. She joined YAT to share and learn from youth from different cultures and backgrounds. Nay Bu Taw is inspired by her mother because she is a very strong and caring woman. She also taught Nay Bu Taw to fight for her life and future. Nay Bu Taw loves volunteering, hanging out with friends and watching movies. Nay Bu Taw is currently attending Kwantlen Polytechnic University in Surrey.

Nay Bu Taw came to Canada in 2006, with her mother and five younger siblings, as part of the Karen community from Thailand refugee camps. Most of her early life was spent in refugee camps. She believes that being a refugee is about people making choices to improve their safety and improve their well-being under situations that are dire and life threatening.

### **Nkechi Okonta**

Nkechi graduated from New Westminster Secondary School. Nkechi joined the YAT at the age of 18; and she is originally from Nigeria. She has dark complexion and is courageous, optimistic and likes meeting new people.

### **Saad Al-Samarrai**

Saad was 14 years old when he joined the YAT. He goes to Kwantlen Park Secondary in Surrey. He was born in Baghdad, Iraq and then came to Canada with his family in 2008. Saad enjoys reading, playing/watching soccer. Saad has suffered from discrimination throughout his years in Canada. This pushed him to becoming more involved in the community by joining YAT, going through the My Circle training and becoming a part of the Action team.

### **Tanvi Bhatia**

Tanvi was born in India but moved to Canada when she was two years old. She is currently attending Burnaby South Secondary School and trying to learn both the inside and outside of school, while actively striving to read every exceptional piece of literature out there — and maybe one day write books herself.

### **Tiba Al-Humaimidi**

Tiba Alhumaimidi was 14 years old when she joined the YAT. She was born in Iraq, but lived in Dubai - UAE for years before moving to Canada at the age of 13. She currently lives in Surrey and likes playing sports and chatting with her friends.

We also want to acknowledge the contributions made by Joana Lee and Abdullah Al-Humaimidi to this process.

## Youth Workers

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### **Nathalie Lozano**

Nathalie came with her parents from Colombia as a refugee 12 years ago. For the past ten years she has been working with other immigrant and refugee youth to mobilize and advocate for issues that affect newcomer youth. Nathalie has a Bachelor of Arts degree in International Studies from Simon Fraser University, is currently doing her master's degree in Gender Studies, and was the program coordinator for the Multicultural Youth Circle at Immigrant Services Society of BC.

### **María Escolán**

María Escolán is from El Salvador and moved to Vancouver with her family in 1990 when she was seven years old. She currently works with immigrant and refugee youth and violence prevention programming at MOSAIC. Maria is dedicated to a journey of learning and working towards social justice, especially in the areas of immigrant and racialized communities, children and youth, gender, and sexual diversity.

### **Joon Hwang**

Joon came to Vancouver from South Korea in 2000. He joined the MY Circle Program in 2006. Since then, he has been involved in various community projects and initiatives for immigrant and refugee youth through the Action Team and the Youth Advisory Team with the Vancouver Foundation and B.C.'s Representative for Children and Youth. He has also worked as a youth worker for programs such as the Moving Ahead Program at Immigrant Services Society of BC in Tri-cities and Maple Ridge.

### **Pablo Muñoz**

Pablo is a Colombian born artist living and working in Vancouver. He moved to Canada when he was 11 years old and is very committed to working with his community. His work stretches from acting, poetry, dancing, and visual arts. Pablo started painting and writing at a very early age, taking his inspiration from his hometown's landscapes and the struggles of immigrants and Latin American people. He is currently going to school and is involved in several community art projects, mostly with immigrant youth. Throughout all of his work he keeps the idea that art is not a tool for social change but a living entity within it.

# Project Management

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**Alejandra Lopez and Jorge E. Salazar,**  
Project Coordinators

**Mark Gifford,** Director, Grants & Community Initiatives, Vancouver Foundation

**Vi Nguyen,** Director, Grants & Community Initiatives, Vancouver Foundation

We also want to thank Vancouver Foundation and B.C.'s Representative for Children and Youth for believing in youth engagement, and local champions that hosted regional dialogues.

## About the Representative for Children and Youth

The Representative for Children and Youth supports children, youth and families in B.C. who need help in dealing with the child- and youth-serving system, provides oversight to the Ministry of Children and Family Development and advocates for improvements to the child-serving system.

The mandate of the Representative for Children and Youth is to improve services and outcomes for children and youth in B.C. through advocacy, accountability and review. The Representative is an Independent Officer of the Legislature and does not report through a provincial ministry.

Special thanks to Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond (B.C.'s Representative for Children and Youth) John Greschner (Deputy Representative for Children and Youth), Melanie Mark (Associate Deputy Representative, Advocacy, Aboriginal and Community Relations), and Kathi Springer (Advisor).

## About Vancouver Foundation

Vancouver Foundation's mission is to harness the gifts of energy, ideas, time, and money to make meaningful and lasting impacts on communities. Founded in 1943, Vancouver Foundation is the largest of Canada's 191 community foundations.

Vancouver Foundation is leading efforts to engage young people in decision-making roles that help create more inclusive and welcoming communities. We're honoured to partner with the Representative in working with immigrant and refugee youth to advance recommendations from the 2011 Summit and 2012 Community Dialogues.

Special thanks to Faye Wightman (former President/CEO, Vancouver Foundation), for her willingness to listen to young people, and find ways to include their voices in the work of the Foundation. Also to Megan Kane and Pegah Pourkarimi, who lent administrative and editorial support to this project.

## Local Champions

*Regional dialogues were held in partnership with organizations identified as local champions. Special thanks to:*

Central Vancouver Island Multicultural Society in Nanaimo [www.cvims.org](http://www.cvims.org)

Immigrant and Multicultural Services Society in Prince George [www.imss.ca](http://www.imss.ca)

Langley Community Services Society in Langley [www.lcss.ca](http://www.lcss.ca)

Inter-Cultural Association of Greater Victoria in Victoria [www.icavictoria.org](http://www.icavictoria.org)

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