

Original Article

Cultivating social occupations, spaces, and networks: service providers' perspectives on enabling immigrants' social participation¹

Cultivando ocupações sociais, espaços e redes: as perspectivas dos prestadores de serviços sobre como possibilitar a participação social dos imigrantes

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Abstract

Introduction: Immigrants may experience many barriers to social participation within host societies. Immigrants' integration into Canadian society is supported through government-funded services. **Objective:** In the present study, we explored the perspectives of service providers working in community organizations regarding their role in enabling immigrants' social participation through occupations in British Columbia, Canada. **Method:** Representatives from twenty different organizations providing services to the community participated in a constructivist qualitative study aiming to uncover aspects shaping opportunities for occupational participation provided for immigrants. **Results:** Drawing on semi-structured interviews and using thematic analysis, we identified three main themes relating to cultivating social occupations, spaces, and networks. Findings illustrate that service providers' cultivation of these opportunities can support immigrants' desired social roles and social identities, further enabling their participation in receiving societies. **Conclusion:** Emphasis upon supporting socio-economic integration into society appears to limit a client-centred approach to developing opportunities for social participation through occupation. Implications for occupational therapists and scientists are discussed.

Keywords: Community Participation. Immigration. Social Participation.

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Resumo

Introdução: Os imigrantes podem enfrentar muitas barreiras à participação social nas sociedades em que são acolhidos. A integração dos imigrantes na sociedade canadense é apoiada por serviços financiados pelo governo. **Objetivo:** No presente estudo, exploramos as perspectivas dos prestadores de serviços que trabalham em organizações comunitárias em relação ao seu papel em permitir a participação social dos imigrantes por meio de ocupações na British Columbia, Canadá. **Método:** Representantes de vinte diferentes organizações que prestam serviços à comunidade participaram de um estudo qualitativo construtivista com o objetivo de discutir aspectos que configuram as oportunidades de participação ocupacional oferecidas aos imigrantes. **Resultados:** A partir de entrevistas semiestruturadas e por meio da análise temática, identificamos três temas principais relacionados ao cultivo de ocupações, espaços e redes sociais. **Conclusão:** A ênfase no apoio à integração socioeconômica na sociedade parece limitar uma abordagem centrada no cliente para desenvolver oportunidades de participação social por meio da ocupação. Implicações para terapeutas ocupacionais e cientistas ocupacionais são discutidas.

Palavras-chave: Participação da Comunidade. Imigração. Participação Social.

Introduction

Immigration plays a vital role in shaping host countries, by contributing to their economies, bolstering their demographics, and enriching their societies, among other potential benefits. Yet immigration remains a contentious and politically polarizing issue (Jetten & Esses, 2018). Governments thus strategically manage immigration through policies and services aimed at leveraging the benefits of immigration while mitigating its challenges (Silva, 2013; Akbari & MacDonald, 2014). International migration has been responsible for 80% of Canada's population growth since 1990 (Hussen, 2018). The majority of immigrants are admitted through categories designed to promote economic growth (Mendicino, 2020), with government funding for immigrant-serving organizations prioritizing their economic integration (Trudeau & Veronis, 2009; Veronis, 2013). The Canadian Multiculturalism Act (Government of Canada, 1985, p. 2-5), however, calls for organizations and public institutions to ensure "[...] full participation in Canadian society, including the social and economic aspects, of individuals of all origins and their communities" and assist them in the "elimination of any barrier to that participation". Enabling immigrants' *social* participation can enhance social identity, mental health, community connections, social cohesion, social capital and opportunities for civic engagement including employment for immigrant populations (Simich et al., 2005; Xue, 2008; Couton, 2014; Huot et al., 2016; Thornton & Spalding, 2018). Social participation has been conceptualized in different ways (Piškur et al., 2014) and our use of this term most closely reflects the definition provided by Levasseur et al. (2010, p. 2148) referring to "[...] a person's involvement in activities that provide interaction with others in society or the community".

The concept of occupational participation adds an important dimension to broader understandings of social participation (Niemi et al., 2019; Silva & Oliver, 2019). Occupational participation refers to engagement in activities of daily living embedded in one's socio-cultural context and necessary to one's well-being (Kielhofner, 2008). Participation is enhanced when these daily occupations have a social meaning for the individual and support desired social roles and identities (Kielhofner & Forsyth, 1997; Larsson-Lund & Nyman, 2016). Immigrants' social participation must be supported by appropriate policies, laws and social structures to ensure equitable access (Niemi et al., 2019). Practitioners of social occupational therapy in Brazil have argued that occupational therapists must not only address individuals' needs, but also "[...] the social field of action" shaping "social participation and the everyday lives of certain individuals, groups and collectives" (Munguba et al., 2018, p. 893).

Research has shown that immigrants experience inequitable access to occupations that promote participation due to contextualized structural and personal factors (Stadnyk et al., 2010; Gupta, 2012; Hocking, 2017). Immigrants face many barriers to social participation, such as occupational disruption, social identity and role disruption, and systemic constraints (Huot & Laliberte Rudman, 2010; Nizzero et al., 2017). Cultural, institutional, physical and social environments can further limit immigrants' potential to build new patterns of occupational engagement that support participation (Townsend & Polatajko, 2007). Immigrants may be expected to achieve certain levels of socio-cultural and linguistic competence as well as socio-economic capital beyond what may be achievable within particular contexts (Huot et al., 2016; Huot, 2017). They must also interact with new institutions, which may devalue their credentials and experience, and require engagement in time-consuming resettlement occupations (Couton & Gaudet, 2008; Huot et al., 2016). Moreover, immigrants must navigate new physical and social contexts that can be further constrained by discrimination, loss of status, poverty, disability, shrunken social networks and language barriers (Huot & Laliberte Rudman, 2010; Huot et al., 2016; Huot, 2017; Losoncz & Marlowe, 2019). Barriers to integration and social participation are compounded for immigrants who face intersecting systems of oppression (e.g., white supremacy, patriarchy, heteronormativity) within the host society that contribute to xenophobia, racism, sexism, among other forms of discrimination (Creese & Wiebe, 2012).

Canada's Charter of Rights and Freedoms includes a section on equality rights that states:

Every individual is equal before and under the law and has the right to the equal protection and equal benefit of the law without discrimination and, in particular, without discrimination based on race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age, or mental or physical capacity (Government of Canada, 1982, p. 56).

Forms of discrimination, including racism, continue to exist within Canadian society but are obscured by practices and discourses denying racism and its effects. In particular, research has shown that expectations for 'Canadian experience' have been used as an anti-racism strategy to exclude racialized immigrants from the labour market (Creese & Wiebe, 2012; Ku et al., 2019). While Canada does not officially have assimilation-

based immigration policies, its approach to immigrant integration has shifted over time and currently emphasizes notions of inclusion (Griffith, 2017). Specifically, its Settlement Program emphasizes the 'successful integration' of immigrants into Canadian society (Government of Canada, 2019). Though what constitutes 'success' has been critiqued in the literature (Huot et al., 2013; Kyeremeh et al., 2019), federally-funded settlement and integration supports delivered through community-based third party service providers are nonetheless guided by this ideal.

While many studies highlight immigrants' perspectives regarding their occupational needs and desires for social participation (Huot & Veronis, 2018; Nakhaie, 2018; Thornton & Spalding, 2018; Morville & Jessen-Winge, 2019), few studies explore service providers' perspectives. Yet, institutions and organizations, such as agencies that serve immigrants, can advocate for and provide occupational engagement opportunities (Huot & Veronis, 2018; Raanaas et al., 2019). The development and enactment of occupational opportunities for immigrants fits the intention of social occupational therapy that is "[...] focused on social issues and funded outside the health system" (Malfitano et al., 2014, p. 298). The World Federation of Occupational Therapists (2006, p. 2) call "to work collaboratively with individuals, organizations, communities and societies, to promote participation through meaningful occupation" makes taking service providers' perspectives into account essential for more holistically understanding social issues, including immigrant integration. Studies have shown that service providers play an important intermediary role shaping immigrants' integration experiences (de Graauw & Bloemraad, 2017; Huot, 2013; Veronis, 2013). The purpose of this study was to investigate service providers' perceptions of the occupational opportunities made available to support immigrants' social participation. The study was conducted in Metro Vancouver, British Columbia. We specifically addressed two research questions:

- How do service providers promote immigrants' social participation through occupational opportunities?
- What are the perceived benefits and barriers to immigrants' engagement in these occupational opportunities?

Methodology

Adopting a constructivist qualitative approach, our work emphasizes that understanding stems from people's multifaceted interpretations of their contextualized experiences (Carpenter & Suto, 2008). This ontological and epistemological positioning acknowledges that each participant had a unique perspective and interpretation, resulting in a robust understanding of opportunities, barriers and strategies to promote social participation for immigrants. Use of interpretive description helped uncover relationships, associations, and patterns linked to the research questions, and to generate knowledge that can inform practice (Thorne, 2008; Hunt, 2009). Ethics approval was obtained by the University of British Columbia.

Metro Vancouver is among the top destinations for immigrants to Canada, and the city of Vancouver has the highest cost of living in the country (Government of Canada,

2020; Statistics Canada, 2017a). The total population of Metro Vancouver according to the most recent Census (completed in 2016) was 2,463,431, with immigrants representing approximately 41% of the population. The majority arrived as economic immigrants (58%), followed by immigrants sponsored by family (31%) and refugees (9%) (Statistics Canada, 2017b). Metro Vancouver is an ethnically diverse region with a 'visible minority population' representing 48% of the total population (Statistics Canada, 2017b). Between 2011 and 2016, 142,535 immigrants settled in the region, representing an 8.3% growth in the region's immigrant population. Most immigrants arrived from China, the Philippines, Hong Kong, India and the United Kingdom. The top five non-official languages spoken among immigrants were Mandarin, Punjabi, Tagalog, Persian and Cantonese (The Library Link for Newcomers, 2018).

Participants

Stakeholders (e.g., executive directors, program managers, employees) from a range of relevant service providing organizations in Metro Vancouver were invited to participate. Informants who met the following inclusion criteria were recruited through purposive sampling: being 19 years of age or older and working for an established service-providing organization that serves immigrants and/or the general population. Key informant interviews were conducted with participants from 20 different service-providing organizations, including those providing immigrant settlement services as well as those serving the broader population, including immigrants (e.g., public libraries, community centres). Interviews aimed to develop an in-depth understanding of service providers' experiences and roles in supporting social participation for immigrants in Metro Vancouver, and included representatives from each of the region's predominant settlement agencies. A summary of the location, organization type, and targeted clientele of the participating organizations is included in Table 1.

Data Collection and Analysis

Semi-structured key informant interviews, lasting on average between 45 and 60 minutes were completed on site within the participating organizations by members of the research team. The first author (principal investigator of the study) led the process conducting nine of the interviews. She mentored the three co-authors, who were all graduate student trainees, in the interview method and they conducted the remaining interviews. All researchers used the same interview guide. The first author was born in Canada positions herself as a white, Francophone, cis-gendered, heterosexual female. The second author identifies as a Canadian born, white, queer, able-bodied, cis-gendered woman without migration experience, but with experience of occupational deprivation due to systemic discrimination. The third author is a Singaporean-born, Asian, heterosexual, able-bodied, cis-gendered man with recent migration experience. The fourth author describes herself as a non-Canadian born, West Asian, established immigrant woman with settlement work experience in Canada.

Table 1. Description of participating organizations.

Participating organization	Location	Organization type	Target clientele
1	Abbotsford	Multi-service community-based agency	General public
2	Vancouver	Multi-service settlement and integration organization	Immigrants
3	Vancouver	Multi-service settlement and integration organization	Immigrants
4	Burnaby	Umbrella organization for immigrant-serving agencies in British Columbia	Multicultural societies and service agencies
5	Surrey	Multi-service settlement and integration organization	General public
6	Vancouver	Multi-service community-based social service agency	General public
7	Vancouver	Mental health support services	Refugees
8	North Vancouver	Multi-service settlement and integration organization	Immigrants
9	Vancouver	Multi-service settlement and integration organization	Immigrant and refugee women
10	Richmond	Multi-service settlement and integration organization	Immigrants
11	Vancouver	Multi-service settlement and integration organization	Immigrants
12	Vancouver	Neighborhood organization	General public
13	Surrey	Multi-service settlement and integration organization	Immigrants
14	Surrey	Recreation and community social services	General public
15	Vancouver	Housing and integration support services	Refugees
16	Vancouver	Neighborhood organization	General public
17	Surrey	Multi-service settlement and integration organization	Immigrants
18	Richmond	Multi-service community-based agency	Children and youth
19	Vancouver	Post-secondary student services	International students
20	Vancouver	Public Library	General public

The participants were free to choose the interview location and all selected their workplace, except for two who requested that interviews be completed by telephone for their convenience. Data collection at two participating organizations was conducted with multiple employees who were interviewed together to share their perspectives

during a single session. A summary of questions asked during the interviews is included in Table 2. All participants provided informed consent and interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Table 2. Summary of questions asked during key informant interviews.

Please describe the organization you work for (or are a member of).
What is your mandate?
What are your main activities?
What is the context or the focus areas (e.g., services, activities offered) that generally lead you to deal with immigrants?
How would you describe your organization's relations with immigrant populations (in general)?
Do you think your organization has been able to reach targeted clients/populations?
What kind of opportunities for participation are offered to immigrants by your organization?
What are the advantages or the benefits for immigrants to socially participate and engage in different community sites?
Can you describe/provide an overview of the immigrant populations who participate in your organization (while maintaining confidentiality and anonymity)?
What is the usual duration of immigrants' participation/engagement?
What is the nature of their participation/engagement (type of activity, social interactions, etc.)?
Have you noticed factors that facilitate/restrict immigrants' participation in different community sites?
What obstacles or challenges might immigrants face in terms of their social participation and engagement in Metro Vancouver?
In your opinion, what is the effectiveness of social participation and engagement for the integration and inclusion of immigrants in Metro Vancouver?
In your opinion, what are the main obstacles faced by immigrants in their efforts to integrate into Metro Vancouver?
More generally, what role do you think social participation and engagement can play to facilitate the settlement, integration and inclusion of immigrants in the community as well as in the Canadian society more broadly?
Have you noticed trends or a pattern in terms of immigrant populations who socially participate and get involved in this space/site? (e.g., based on length of time in Canada, legal status, socio-economic class, sex, ethnicity/race, language skills, familial context, among others)
In your opinion, do different identity markers (e.g., legal migrant status, date of arrival, country of origin, socio-economic class, sex, ethnicity/race, language skills, familial context, among others) have an influence on the practices, the experiences and the results of immigrants' social participation and engagement? (e.g., for their economic, social and cultural integration and inclusion, etc). Please explain.
In your opinion, how could social participation and engagement opportunities be improved for immigrants in Metro Vancouver?

All verbatim transcripts were initially analyzed using whole text analysis, meaning they were read in their entirety by all authors. Thematic analysis steps of familiarization, code generation, and theme construction were then used to further analyze the data

(Braun et al., 2019). The first three authors each separately coded the first transcript using a line-by-line in vivo coding approach through which codes were inductively generated based on the transcript content (King, 2008). They then met to discuss the process and ensure they were using a consistent approach. No coding structure was developed a priori. The remaining transcripts were divided and coded separately in this iterative fashion by the second and third authors. The full list of codes generated through this process were then reviewed and grouped together into categories where similarities were identified (e.g., all nodes referring to space, place or environment were grouped into a category). The list of categories was then used to develop the three main themes and related sub-themes presented in this paper. In a process of iterative analysis and ongoing reflexivity, researchers recorded similarities and differences between transcripts, the affirmation or refutation of their assumptions, and potential contextual influences on informants' responses. Researchers also recorded their own emotional responses to the data (e.g., surprise, frustration), analytic memos, general thoughts, possible poignant quotes and potential themes in addition to codes. They then met with the first author to debrief and engage in a collective, reflexive process (Carpenter & Suto, 2008) where they discussed what they were learning from the data in relation to the research questions and how the data reflected, differed from, and/or contributed to their initial assumptions and developing understanding of the topic. This process helped ensure that categories we developed did not simply reflect issues we expected to see (e.g., potentially limited access to physical spaces), but also issues we had not previously anticipated (e.g., outreach efforts within neighborhoods).

While our exploratory study was not anchored by a specific theoretical framework, our analysis was informed by our understandings of occupational and social participation described above, as well as our interest in better understanding the role of occupational therapists as change agents and the importance of advocacy (Cyr, 2015). Kirsh (2015) explained that collaborative advocacy requires both understanding issues and lobbying for the 'right' people to pay attention to social issues and to make necessary changes. This research brings together perspectives of stakeholders from organizations serving immigrants to provide institutional level findings that can be used to inform advocacy efforts within the community.

Findings

We present three themes describing service providers' perceived roles in supporting immigrants' social participation: 1) cultivating social occupations, 2) cultivating social spaces, and 3) cultivating social networks.

Cultivating Social Occupations

All informants described occupational opportunities that either facilitated or prepared immigrants for social participation. Informants offered two main types of opportunities through organization-specific programming or inter-organization connections: preparatory occupational opportunities, and social engagement occupational opportunities.

Preparatory Occupational Opportunities

Informants described assisting immigrants with settlement occupations to prepare them for social engagement. Examples of preparatory occupations included accessing transit to attend social activities, finding childcare, securing housing, engaging in counseling to support healthy relating, accessing funding and increasing socio-cultural and linguistic competencies. One informant described the importance of meeting immigrants' immediate needs in order to support their capacity to engage in more social occupations, and to begin expanding their networks:

[I]f[...] learning the language or housing is secure, you're putting food on the table because you have like employment, you're feeling fulfilled [...] you tend to be more set up to then want to engage more socially (Participant 17).

Acquiring English language fluency was emphasized as essential for engaging socially beyond one's immediate ethnic community given that immigrants were settling in the Anglophone dominant context of Metro Vancouver:

[L]anguage ability is a huge one. If you speak English or not, just your comfort level of going around accessing anything. Like you're going to be way more in general willing to, like, go to the [public] pool if you can speak English (Participant 16).

Enabling access to formal language classes or more informal conversation circles was described as important for both improving language skills and supporting additional settlement occupations by facilitating communication skills, and building relationships amongst participants.

Social engagement occupational opportunities

Findings highlight the importance of service providers' role in providing or connecting immigrants to occupational opportunities designed to cultivate social engagement such as participating in volunteering, food gatherings, sports and recreation activities, and field trips. Multiple informants described the importance of volunteering opportunities for promoting immigrants' social engagement and access to employment-related social circles:

[W]e encourage volunteering [...] to newcomers as an opportunity to, not only connect with other people, to gain some Canadian volunteer work experience (Participant 12).

The informants described ways that service providers not only prepare immigrants for social participation but can also help rebuild their social capital through hosting particular activities to promote real-time diversification of networks and familiarization with social spaces. One informant described the range of recreational opportunities their organization supported, explaining that the goal is not to focus on a specific occupation, but to use a range of occupations in order to support social participation:

[W]e support different programs that can help so that families as well as kids can have funding access to recreation sports. It's not just sports. It could also be like cooking, sewing, arts, helping direct them to library services. So, anything within the whole recreation umbrella (Participant 15).

Thus, service providers supported immigrant engagement in varied occupations, such as preparing and eating food to bond people in particular locations (e.g., kitchens and community centres), as well as offering field trips to help people connect and network while becoming familiar with culturally important social spaces such as museums and parks. The value of social occupations was described as multifaceted, with emphasis being placed on developing social bonds, experiencing new occupations, and becoming familiar with local spaces that are publicly accessible. Providing such opportunities dismantled barriers and enabled immigrants to bond with others through shared doing. Service providers' cultivation of social occupations helped to address immigrants' decreased access to social spaces and networks following migration.

Cultivating Social Spaces

Programs and services supported the cultivation of both physical and ideological spaces to promote immigrants' social participation. Service providers' intentionality in offering a variety of accessible, ideologically safe, dignifying and welcoming social spaces was aimed at enhancing immigrants' access to social occupations and networks. Informants described purposefully hosting programming in social hubs, such as recreation centers so immigrants could gain familiarity with culturally important social spaces and the networks that intersected there. They also provided access to space for autonomous gathering and educated staff and communities on how to be trauma-informed, dismantle power imbalances and be more welcoming to create an environment where immigrants could fully participate in social occupations.

Physical spaces

Two forms of physical space were described as important for supporting immigrants' social participation: social hubs and space for autonomous organizing. Informants discussed how they intentionally offered programming in social hubs or provided the types of resources required to access such hubs, such as collaborating with other organizations who could provide space (e.g., community centres, schools). As part of a form of community outreach, informants explained how they purposefully met clients within different venues to enhance immigrants' familiarity with social spaces, rather than always have them come to the organization's main office:

We always encourage [immigrants] to go out to social activities, to, you know, go out, go to [recreation] centers, talk to other people.[...] So resettlement workers go out there and they help people there as well. Uh, why? Because then at least those clients are at a different venue. They're at a different location so they can see what's happening around them, how other migrants are, um, you know, going through their process of immigration, integration, settlement (Participant 14).

Access to such spaces was enhanced through different strategies, such as funding memberships and providing immigrants with leisure access cards. Immigrants then had free access to recreational opportunities in public spaces such as pools and ice rinks.

Recognizing that availability and affordability made accessing space in Metro Vancouver particularly challenging for recently arrived immigrant populations, service providers also provided support for autonomous organizing. One informant explained:

Our organization, we do offer a community room here. Free of charge. [...] and, you'd be amazed to see people organize language classes there, to teach their own languages to their community members (Participant 2).

Thus, in addition to supporting opportunities for immigrants to socially interact with members of the broader community, informants recognized the importance of enabling immigrants to also engage socially with members of their ethnic communities.

Ideological spaces

The need to cultivate ideologically safe and welcoming spaces that are inclusive and guided by anti-racist policies and practices was described as being vital for helping immigrants overcome fear and fatigue. The informants described various ways that service providing organizations worked to create ideologically conducive spaces; including training their staff in dismantling power imbalances, promoting mutuality, implementing trauma-informed programming, and educating the public to adopt welcoming ideologies. While many immigrants require support through the integration process, there was an acknowledgement that their needs should not be perceived as burdensome:

[H]uman beings with each other, trying [...] to decrease as much as possible this power imbalance of 'we are the ones who are helping you, you are the ones who are receiving help' (Participant 16).

In addition to ensuring their own use of using trauma-informed approaches for programming, encouraging and training others to adopt this approach was also an important contribution made by service providers. One informant explained that their organization provided trauma-informed training for English language teachers, outreach support workers, and childcare workers to help promote more positive classroom and learning experiences for immigrant children and adults.

Supporting the creation of welcoming spaces was stressed as being critical for enabling social participation. This entailed not only providing opportunities for immigrants to get involved in the community, but preparing community members to be inclusive:

[S]ocial integration is connected to our communities being supportive of immigration [...] that's part of it, it's connected, to be supportive of all work around being anti-racism and learning. [...] So if we find ways to open and to build healthy communities, then we will have healthy immigrants. We'll be compassionate to those who are most excluded (Participant 9).

This informant then went on to describe an event their organization hosted that was meant to shift colonial ideologies to more inclusive ideologies through Indigenous and immigrant storytelling. They explained that during the event people shared their own experiences and used music and art to incorporate various ways of knowing into the interaction.

Service providers acknowledged the lack of access to physical and ideologically safe spaces as barriers to immigrants' social participation. They worked towards dismantling these barriers by supporting access to social hubs and spaces for autonomous gathering, as well as through encouraging ideologically welcoming spaces that promoted belonging.

Cultivating social networks

Findings highlight ways that service providers use programming to help connect immigrants to a diversity of networks that include other immigrants, neighbours and gatekeepers in order to enhance their opportunities for social participation. Informants described ways immigrants can experience reduced social networks leading to isolation and limited opportunities to build socio-cultural familiarity with the host community. Informants also acknowledged that building friendships helped mitigate the isolation that can characterize the settlement process: “[W]e know that the importance of networking, and that's why one of our goals for workshops are [...] to just come and get involved for active networking, finding different, just making different friendships [...]” (Participant 11). This informant went on to specifically address the need to support a move from isolation to networking, particularly with those who may have had similar experiences and can sympathize with the challenges they face:

I think when we're isolated, our inner voice tells us that it's so much worse for us that nobody can understand where, you know, what our troubles are, and it's so difficult for us and we're never gonna be able to do it. And when you get people in a room with others, there's a recognition that, 'I'm facing tough times, but others might be.' It might be the same, it might be different, but that others have not only experienced those challenges but also opportunities to see people who have overcome those challenges, and to see, 'I may be here now but I'm gonna be [t]here’ (Participant 11).

Networks with Other Immigrants

The cultivation of immigrant networks was supported through occupational opportunities, such as English classes and knitting circles:

So the idea is they can come, they're learning something. There's a facilitator who is teaching them how to knit. But again, they're talking. And in talking, they're sat recognizing I'm not alone (Participant 12).

Networks with Neighbors

Many informants described providing programming in immigrants' neighborhoods to support community building and to enhance accessibility and decrease the economic barriers related to transportation. Neighborhood houses and community centres offered immigrant-specific, as well as more general, occupational opportunities allowing immigrants to interact with a variety of people in their local community. These types of interactions were aimed at supporting the development of a sense of belonging:

[T]o see newcomers as a member of the community and not just as a settlement participant [...] to connect them in non-settlement programming as well, because that fosters a sense of identity that is outside of their migrant experience (Participant 13).

Networks with Gatekeepers

Organizations also cultivated networks through the use of gatekeepers, which refers to Canadian-born or more established immigrant members of the community who can provide skills, knowledge, mentorship and further network diversification promoting social participation. Mentorship programs were a common theme. One informant explained how a friendship program allowed gatekeepers to support knowledge translation and diversification of immigrants' networks: "*[A] friendship program that tries to match two people to meet informally [...]. [A] lot of settlement information gets passed on, but I think, more importantly, it begins to form a network and to increase people's networks*" (Participant 12).

Service providers also connected immigrants to gatekeepers who could increase their socio-cultural familiarity and linguistic skills, as well as enhance access to employment-related social participation:

[W]e connect to them with the professionals or with the mentorship services. We connect them with the lawyers, with the teachers so they can get information from them. Like which process to go through to become a lawyer, to become a teacher (Participant 14).

Service providers aimed to address immigrants' isolation, lack of opportunities for social participation, reduced social networks and relevant socio-cultural and linguistic skills by cultivating their networks with other immigrants, neighbors and gatekeepers.

Discussion

Evidence-informed calls for occupational justice, including the World Federation of Occupational Therapists' position statement on human rights in relation to human occupation and participation (World Federation of Occupational Therapists, 2006) signal the importance of enabling immigrants' full and meaningful integration into host societies. Our findings drawn from service providers' perspectives support the need to advocate for immigrants' social participation through engagement in occupations. Specifically, this study makes a novel contribution to the literature by outlining how

institutions can play an important role in addressing barriers to immigrants' social participation by cultivating social occupations, spaces and networks. Our work can thus inform collaborative advocacy between researchers, therapists, and community service providers, and contributes to the growing body of occupational therapy literature on the importance of immigrant social participation (Mirza, 2012; Gupta & Hocking, 2018; Delaisse et al., 2021; Lavalley & Bailliard, 2020).

Whiteford (2003) has articulated the need to adopt a communitarian perspective within occupational science research. In describing the Third Way and the Enabling State, Whiteford quotes Latham (2001, p. 13) who stated that "The public sector needs to get into the habit of devolving power and giving people things to do. It needs to act as a facilitator of social capital" (Whiteford, 2003, p. 43). The Canadian federal government has not adopted this model of governance. In line with neoliberal principles it has instead largely decentralized responsibility for immigrant settlement service provision to community-based non-profit organization through contract-based funding (Evans et al., 2005; Richmond & Shields, 2005). Our study highlights some of the challenges this can create for organizations to provide their clients with personally and culturally meaningful opportunities for social participation. The emphasis in our data upon encouraging immigrants to participate with members of society beyond their own ethno-cultural communities by supporting diversified networks to open up immigrants' access to social spaces and social occupations echoes other migration research. Couton (2014) found that ethno-specific networking in Canada increased immigrant participation within those networks, but that solely engaging in such networks limited access to both economic and social participation within the broader society. Salami et al. (2019) completed interviews with 53 service providers facilitating community belonging for immigrants in Alberta, Canada. They found that service providers offered language lessons and recreation programs that provided knowledge and skills for new occupations such as winter camping. Their work identified programs aimed at enhancing skills and supporting immigrants to engage beyond their ethno-cultural networks to interact with mainstream society. While our study was conducted in a different province, given that most settlement services are federally funded it is interesting to note the similar emphasis upon offering preparatory occupations to build social capital and increasing access to more networks and spaces that was found across these different geographic settings. Attempts to build connections between immigrants and the receiving society through participation in social occupations can also be found in studies from other countries. For instance, Raanaas et al. (2019) studied choir singing in Norway. They found that this occupation aided immigrants in developing a sense of belonging by supporting networking with both individuals from their ethno-cultural group and members from the host society. One participant described recruiting fellow immigrants to join the choir because participation offered a space for social gathering that promoted health, well-being and integration.

Ultimately, the ways that informants in our study described cultivating social occupations, spaces and networks (e.g., network diversification through connections to gatekeepers who increased immigrants' access to employment-related occupations and spaces, as well as immigrants' socio-cultural and linguistic competencies), largely reflect the priorities of the government-funded Settlement Program that emphasizes 'successful integration' (Kyeremeh et al., 2019). With respect to cultivating social occupations

there was a clear emphasis upon helping immigrants to develop English language fluency and to prepare for and engage in the labour market, even if through unpaid (volunteer) opportunities to gain 'Canadian experience' that is often expected from employers. While the Settlement Program acknowledges that integration is a two-way process requiring mutual adaptation on the part of immigrants and the society, it seeks to assist "immigrants and refugees to overcome barriers specific to the newcomer so that they can participate in social, cultural, civic and economic life in Canada" (Government of Canada, 2019). It supports the following main areas of direct service delivery: needs assessment and referrals, information and orientation, language training, employment-related, and community connections (Government of Canada, 2019). These priorities are evident in our findings whereby informants' descriptions of their efforts to provide opportunities for social participation through occupations, spaces and networks tend to reflect integrating immigrants into the mainstream society, with fewer opportunities to identify and address grassroots and client-centred needs and interests.

Social participation requires occupational engagement that develops and reinforces valued social roles. International migration causes occupational disruption and a change in social settings, limiting embodiment of previous social roles (Huot & Laliberte Rudman, 2010). Findings from Veronis' (2013) study of settlement agencies' role in Latin American immigrant mobilization and social action in Ontario, Canada illustrates how service providers enabled a shift for their clients from recipients of services to established community contributors (Veronis, 2013). Specifically, the agencies saw their role as a "social and political space for immigrant empowerment and participation with some potential for concrete action to improve Latin Americans' wellbeing in Toronto" (Veronis, 2013, p. 36-37). Service providers provided space for particular occupations and connected immigrants to networks. Our study raised similar findings with some agencies having the capacity to offer physical space for autonomous organizing by immigrant groups and attempts to reduce power imbalances between service providers and their clients. This reflects results from Huot's (2013) study on Francophone immigrant service agencies in Ontario, Canada. Although many of the organizations included in her study expressed feeling pressured by technologies of neoliberal governance to focus on immigrants' economic productivity, they acknowledged their role in community building. Organizations were found to host *community occupations* in a specific locale to enable integration of French-speaking migrants into Francophone minority community networks (Huot, 2013). Yet, much of the service delivery in both provincial contexts remains largely constrained by eligibility requirements of government funding, which limits their capacity to offer occupational opportunities beyond those covered by the Settlement Program.

A recent scoping review study by Peters and Galvaan (2020) examined how 'opportunity' is conceptualized within occupational science literature. They found three main ways that opportunity tends to be understood within the discipline: as synonymous with capabilities; as an option to participate; and in relation to social transformation. The first draws from the capabilities approach and emphasizes basic freedoms and entitlements needed for 'doing' and 'being'. The second refers to the various options that are available to participate in, without emphasis on the outcomes of such options. The third emphasizes social capital "as an element of opportunity contributing to processes of social transformation" (Peters & Galvaan, 2020, p. 13).

Respondents in our study acknowledged their role in supporting social participation through their description of the ways they cultivated preparatory social occupations, social engagement opportunities, physically accessible and ideologically conducive social spaces, and diversified social networks. Thus, our findings mainly reflect the second categorization of 'opportunity' with an emphasis on what types of options are available for occupational participation with others. Attempts to build social capital appear to be aimed more toward helping immigrants integrate into mainstream society, rather than seeking to transform society.

Advocacy efforts within occupational therapy could aim to provide more socially transformative opportunities. Recent studies examining the spatiality of occupation in relation to immigrants' everyday lives have begun to highlight the potential to use community spaces to support meaningful occupational participation (Delaisse et al., 2020). Research by Lavalley and colleagues (Lavalley & Bailliard, 2020; Lavalley et al., 2020) outlines how shared occupations within a senior centre frequented by an increasing number of Latinx immigrants contributed to the transformation of social relationships within the centre. Their ethnographic study found that a "communal perspective of occupation seemed to contribute to rapid action towards positive community change" (p. 1). Intentional cultivation of spaces to support occupational participation and networking was also central to Huot and Veronis' (2018) findings on the role of community spaces for the integration of linguistic minority immigrants. They found that access to social spaces, such as community centres, enabled Francophone migrants in Ontario, Canada to engage in social occupations and make connections with a variety of people (Huot & Veronis, 2018). However, they highlighted that the types of spaces shaped what occupations could be performed and with whom. For immigrants to integrate with a variety of networks, spaces needed to be conducive to occupational engagement that both supported shared interests and reinforced intersecting identities (Huot & Veronis, 2018). Our study contributes to this growing body of literature with findings that specifically outline efforts to cultivate social occupations, spaces and networks to support immigrants' social participation.

Limitations and Future Research

This study had three main limitations: limited analysis of systemic barriers, unaddressed specificity of supported populations, and lack of immigrant client perspectives. Firstly, due to the exploratory nature of this study, we were unable to fully address systemic barriers faced by service providers. Many of the informants mentioned issues such as lack of funding that constrained programming promoting social participation. We acknowledge that the pervasive influence of neoliberalism governing Canadian health and social service systems has led to a shift toward project-based funding, resulting in the need for service providers to deliver programs supporting the government's emphasis on economic integration (Trudeau & Veronis, 2009; Veronis, 2013). Funding is but one systemic barrier. A direction for future research is to further explore additional systemic barriers that these agencies face. Collection of data specific to systemic barriers could provide insight into the policies, laws and social structures that constrain or enable equitable service access, occupational justice and full social participation for all immigrants.

Secondly, the exploratory nature of our study and resulting themes did not capture the specificities of the populations served by the community organizations. Future research could more closely address agencies serving specific populations (e.g., serving asylum seekers), those that engage with immigrants during different periods of settlement (e.g., those who are recently arrived, ageing immigrants), as well as those catering to specific needs (e.g., unhoused migrants). This would provide additional knowledge regarding how different service providers enable participation for specific groups to further nuance understandings of the key role played by community organizations. Thirdly, while our aim was to focus on the perspectives of representatives from community-based service providing organizations, we acknowledge that important insights that could have been gleaned from their immigrant clients remain absent as this was beyond the scope of the present study. Nonetheless, future research should examine immigrants' perspectives to better understand and address issues of racism and structural oppression.

Conclusion

Our study shares institutional level perspectives regarding immigrants' access to and engagement in occupations that promote social participation. Our findings show that service providers work towards occupational justice by addressing immigrants' barriers to social participation by increasing access to social occupations, social spaces and social networks. This contributes to the research base illustrating that non-profit organizations are resource-limited and though they collaborate to offer a variety of services to immigrants, they often lack the time and energy necessary to address sources of "inequity, discrimination and injustice" (Veronis, 2013, p.16). Health and social service providers, including occupational therapists share similar goals of supporting immigrant participation and promoting justice. Responding to the World Federation of Occupational Therapists' call to end occupational injustice and support participation (World Federation of Occupational Therapists, 2006), we recommend occupational therapists increasingly collaborate with non-profit organizations and advocate alongside community service providers working with immigrant clients to address relevant 'social questions' shaping social participation and occupational engagement (Munguba et al., 2018).

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Suzanne Huot principal investigator, participant recruitment, data collection, manuscript revising and editing. Jaqueline Brower conceptual framing, data analysis, text conception. Alex Tham conceptual framing, data analysis, text conception, prepared table 2. Atieh Razavi Yekta research coordination, participant recruitment, data collection, manuscript formatting, prepared table 1.

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