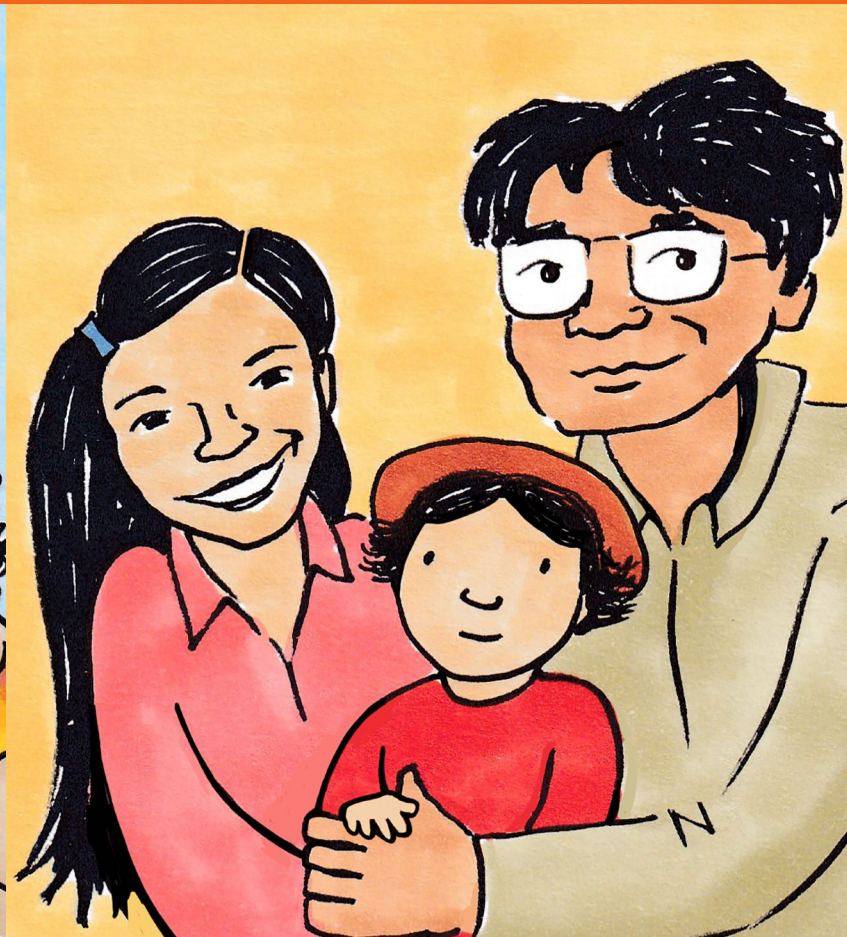


December  
2022

# JOURNEYS

THROUGH EARLY LEARNING &  
CHILDCARE IN EDMONTON

The experiences of  
ETHNOCULTURAL FAMILIES



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# who we are

**The Journeys Project is a collaboration between the Multicultural Health Brokers Cooperative, the Community-University Partnership and the Edmonton Council for Early Learning and Care.**

## **Multicultural Health Brokers Cooperative (MCHB)**

was founded 25 years ago to support Edmonton's newcomers. The goal was to enhance the health and well-being of families and foster their efforts at building community so they could thrive, and actively contribute to society.

The organization empowers individuals and families from minority populations through cultural brokering practice so as to ensure holistic, and culturally relevant support.

The cultural brokers are from immigrant communities, and know firsthand the social, economic, and language difficulties that immigrants and refugees face. This places us in a unique position to bridge the gap between newcomer families and Canadian society.

The cultural brokers support families throughout their lives, from initial migration, to navigating systems in perinatal health, youth programming and services, and seniors outreach.

## **Community-University Partnership (CUP) for the Study of Children, Youth, and Families**

is a unique collaboration among the University of Alberta, community agencies, and organizations in and around Edmonton and across Alberta. CUP is committed to improving the development of children, youth, families and communities by creating or mobilizing evidence-based knowledge that impacts programs and policies.

## **Edmonton Council for Early Learning & Care (ECELC)**

ECELC builds on existing capacities and provides leadership in managing, planning, and supporting the development of a system of high-quality early learning and care services in Edmonton, with an emphasis on meeting the needs of low-income and vulnerable families.



# introduction

**In January 2021, we launched the Journeys Project. The aim of the project was to gather rich firsthand accounts of the experiences of ethnocultural parents with young children (birth to 5 years old) in early learning and childcare (ELCC) in Edmonton.**

From the outset, we were sensitive to the reality that ethnocultural families in Edmonton have been consulted various times in recent years on their experiences. For example, a study by Ashima Sumaru-Jurf and Roxanne Felix-Mah (2019) noted the diversity, multiplicity, and complexity of family experiences, especially as it relates to culture, language, personal and community history, and realities of social and economic marginalization.

Our hope was to build on this work by amplifying the voices of those most impacted.

The domain of early learning and childcare is a complex and highly politicized space characterized by a diversity of interests, opinions, and approaches. We wanted to stay close to people's lived experiences to make visible the stories that are often overlooked, dismissed, and misunderstood.

## **We were interested in answering the following questions:**

- 1) What are the lived experiences of ethnocultural families as they attempt to access and receive early learning and childcare in Edmonton?
- 2) What assets, cultural resources, and ways of knowing can be harnessed to improve the system?
- 3) What opportunities exist to shift approaches and practices and catalyze positive change?



The interwoven threads of our journey

## our values

### Throughout this project...

- We committed to practicing empathy and to listening with respect and care.
- We committed to creating a space for honest and brave conversations, knowing that the topic of childcare cuts to the heart of people. The well-being of our children and our families are our deepest concerns.
- In seeking to facilitate mutual understanding, we applied an intercultural mindset.

### We believe that...

- All people and communities have wisdom and strengths. We embrace different ways of knowing and doing, recognizing the cultural wealth that ethnocultural families offer.
- Change is facilitated by dialogue, deliberation, and co-learning.
- Sustainable change requires addressing issues of equity and power throughout the process of engagement, listening, and action.

# cultural brokering

## The Journeys Project drew on the cultural brokering practice and intercultural expertise of the MCHB.

Cultural brokering involves bridging, connecting, and mediating between groups or persons of differing cultural backgrounds for the purpose of producing change (Jezewski, 1990).

Cultural brokers are those who have themselves lived through the immigrant or refugee experience, and understand the strengths and needs of the communities they serve. As a result of this firsthand experience, our brokers have trust and respect of community members. They are aware and cognizant of the structures and processes of the systems that the community must navigate on a daily basis.

A cultural brokering approach is anchored in principles that support self-determination, agency, and choice – namely that communities:

- determine their own needs
- are full partners in decision-making
- benefit from collaboration
- benefit from the transfer of knowledge and skills.

The cultural brokers at MCHB serve four primary functions in their work with communities: cultural guide, liaison, mediator and catalyst for change.

### **As cultural guides...**

the brokers help both the minority community members, and the larger society understand each other's values, beliefs and practices to increase cultural understanding.

### **As liaisons...**

the brokers serve as communicators between minority communities and the systems they need to access.

### **As mediators...**

the brokers help increase trust for social systems in minority communities, thereby increasing access to those systems.

### **As catalysts for change...**

the brokers advocate for the change we hope to see in formal societal systems through creating inclusive and collaborative environments and work toward changing intergroup and interpersonal relationships and adapting to the changing needs of the communities they serve (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997).

# interculturalism

**Interculturalism is an appreciation for all cultures. It is an ongoing process of mutual exchange, understanding, and acceptance that stimulates learning, shifting perspectives, and co-creation. Differences are acknowledged and celebrated, and barriers are removed.**

The Journeys Project operates with the philosophy of promoting and advocating for a more intercultural society (Verkuyten et al, 2019).

An intercultural society can be juxtaposed with a multicultural society. In a multicultural society, tolerance is valued and one another's cultures are celebrated. However, this only requires surface-level social interaction (e.g. attending an event showcasing a cultural dance).

An intercultural society is one in which both social structures and relationships between members of different cultures are defined by mutual respect, learning from one another, and equality between social groups. Imbalances that result in social exclusion are addressed and mitigated and all peoples are enabled to participate fully in society.

## **embracing cultural wealth**

Seeing things in intercultural ways also allows us to appreciate the assets and cultural wealth that ethnocultural communities provide (Tara J. Yosso, 2005).

### **social capital:**

The strength of networks, and associations with peers and community members, which can be leveraged for success.

### **aspirational capital:**

The strength and persistence of hope, and the inspirational pursuit of dreams in the face of barriers and adversity.

### **familial capital:**

Knowledge that is developed and maintained within generational and 'chosen' family structures.

### **navigational capital:**

The skills of navigating systemic challenges, which are frequently faced and overcome by newcomers and migrants.

### **resistant capital:**

The strength, knowledge and skills that come from consistently challenging inequities, both in their countries of origin and in their host countries

### **linguistic capital:**

The social, intellectual and communication strengths present in anyone who can interact in multiple languages.

### **cultural capital:**

All of the above, plus art, dance, poetry, faith, ritual, and traditions that can bring joy and meaning in the face of adversity.



# understanding cultural distance

One of the key factors contributing to the barriers faced by newcomers to Canada is cultural distance.

Cultural distance is the degree to which shared values, norms and beliefs differ from one country to another” (Hofstede, 2001).

The greater the cultural distance, the greater the barriers faced by newcomers in adjusting to their new home.

The figure on the right shows some of the differences in the norms and values of the societies that our families come from and the Canadian society they are immigrating to.

The families in the Journeys Project exist in the centre of the Venn diagram and have to negotiate these norms and values when endeavouring to access the services they need.

This often proves difficult and it is this space in which cultural brokering plays an integral role in supporting families to navigate these challenging circumstances.

## pre-migration

- non-Western
- attachment to multiple caregivers
- Parents' main role as provider & discipline
- Extended family
- Parental authority
- Children taught duty is to family

## post-migration

- Western
- attachment to primary caregiver
- Parents as 'friend,' 'counsellor,' 'confidante'
- Nuclear family
- Children have choices
- Children's rights

# understanding social exclusion

**Social exclusion refers to a “state in which individuals are unable to participate fully in economic, social, political and cultural life, as well as the process leading to and sustaining such a state.” (United Nations, 2016, p. 18)**

There are various factors that create inequitable systems in which social exclusion is exacerbated. Broadly, these are: poverty, trauma, and colonialism.

## **poverty**

refers to a state of where individuals have insufficient resources to access basic necessities.

## **trauma**

refers to those challenges individuals face that are debilitating and distressing. Trauma can be experienced both individually and collectively with others, and can also be inter-generational.

## **colonialism**

refers to a global system of political control of large geographic areas by nation states. Colonization has led to systems which perpetuate global inequality and other social harms such as racism and ethnocentrism.

One of the main challenges facing many ethnocultural communities is social exclusion.

For newcomers and migrants, the barriers to full inclusion are often significant, tend to be complex and intersectional, and are almost always systemic in nature.

"A socially inclusive society is one that develops the talents and capacities of all members, promotes inclusive participation in all walks of life, actively combats individual and systemic discrimination, and provides valued recognition to groups such as ethno-racial communities" (Canadian Council on Social Development, 2010, p. 29).

# listening

## We engaged 30 parents from 6 ethnocultural communities:

- Kurdish-speaking
- Eritrean and Ethiopian
- Bhutanese
- Filipino
- Spanish-speaking
- Chinese-speaking

The stories shared by parents revealed the nature of the early learning and childcare sector and the contradictions and disconnects in the current system. The ELCC sector in Edmonton is a complex landscape of service providers scattered across the city: for-profit and non-profit; licensed and unlicensed; formal and informal. Some neighbourhoods are well serviced; others are deserts. Some programs are subsidized; others are not. Issues of affordability, accessibility and appropriateness abound.

For many of immigrant parents, childcare sits at the centre of their social, cultural, and economic concerns:

How do they preserve their culture, language, and values? How do they participate in the broader community, while maintaining their unique identities? How do they provide economically for their families and secure a future for them? How do they navigate systems that can be bewildering, impersonal, and impenetrable at times? How can they contribute to improving the programs and services they rely on?

In sharing their stories, participants revealed how their present-day aspirations and struggles are connected to their pre-migration histories as well as to their present-day challenges of gaining meaningful footholds in a host country where the ways of thinking and doing are different.

Through focus groups and key informant interviews we inquired into their experiences, seeking to identify common hopes and concerns.

# personas

We drew on these findings to develop detailed personas and composite stories that describe the journeys of ethnocultural families as they navigate early learning and childcare services in Edmonton.

Each composite story is a semi-fictionalized account woven together from what we heard from multiple participants and informed by the experiences of the brokers who work directly with ethnocultural families. The narratives are presented to stimulate reflection on how policies, practices, and systems affect the lives of immigrant families.

We focused on the following personas, which capture a range of experience: 1) Roni – The story of a refugee; 2) David and Helen – The story of parents with a child with special needs; and 3) Maria and José – The story of temporary foreign workers.

**Personas are powerful exploratory and storytelling tools. They allow us to empathize with another human being. Personas are carefully constructed and based on firsthand experiences of real people.**



These storytellers are not real people, but their experiences and perspectives reflect what we heard during the focus groups and interviews with ethnocultural parents. While some of the struggles around affordability and access to childcare are not exclusive to ethnocultural families, many immigrants are affected disproportionately by them.

Our approach was inspired by empathy and journey mapping processes that explore the emotional, mental, and social experiences of individuals as they interact with a complex system. The composite stories we developed highlight experiences that are deeply personal and detailed, while also illuminating themes that emerged through our interviews and focus groups.

To build these stories we mapped out the experiences of ethnocultural families as they journey to and through childcare. We drew on what we learned from the focus groups and interviews. We also tapped into the wisdom of the brokers as they recalled their experiences of supporting families.



# empathy mapping

We explored how parents find out about childcare programs in the first place; how they register and gain access to the programs; how they experience a typical day of juggling the challenges of parenthood and of getting their children to a program. We described their encounters with staff at the childcare program.

We explored their feelings and concerns—and identified what they might consider as they decide whether to keep their children in a program or to seek other options.

During each stage and every step in their journeys we inquired into:



## **Actions**

What are parents saying & doing?



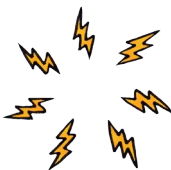
## **Communication channels**

What information are they receiving?



## **Thoughts & Feelings**

What are they thinking & experiencing?



## **Pain Points**

What problems are they encountering?

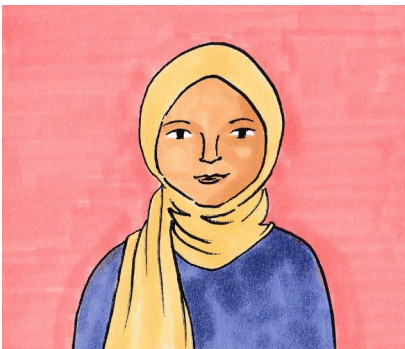


## **Aspirations**

What are their hopes?

# reflective questions

We would like to introduce you to Roni, David and Helen, and Maria and José. Their stories provide glimpses of the complexities and diversity of experiences of ethnocultural families in Edmonton. Stories allow us to navigate the tricky terrain between the head and the heart—and to walk in someone else’s shoes. Although these composite stories provide rich descriptions of the intersectional nature of personal experience, it is important to note that they only provide glimpses of the interwoven realities facing parents. They hint at patterns in a vast tapestry of human experience.



As you read these stories, we encourage you to reflect on the following questions:

- What do these journeys evoke for you?
- What questions do they raise?
- What key challenges (internal and external) are revealed?
- What visible and invisible factors are shaping these experiences? What structural factors may be contributing to these realities? What relational factors and power dynamics are at play? How might cultural factors be influencing these experiences? (Values, norms, beliefs, and ways of thinking and doing)
- Where do we see elements of resilience and cultural wealth in these stories?
- What are the implications for early learning and childcare policies and practices?

# the larger story of immigration

## **Before we travel into these individual stories, it is important to appreciate the larger context of migration to Canada.**

Due to economic, political, and environmental disruptions, the 21st Century is a period of significant global migration. Canada – and Edmonton, more specifically – is a part of this worldwide story. Edmonton has welcomed approximately 12,000 people each year since 2010 from more than 100 countries around the world. One in four Edmontonians is an immigrant – and by 2050, it is anticipated that half of our population will be immigrants. (City of Edmonton, 2021).

In 2019, permanent and non-permanent immigration accounted for more than 80 percent of Canada's population growth (IRCC, 2020). Under the temporary foreign worker and international mobility programs, 404,369 temporary work permits were released. In the same year, 341,180 permanent residents were admitted to Canada while 74,586 temporary workers transitioned to permanent residents. A total of 30,087 refugees also resettled in Canada in 2019.

Much of the recent migration to Canada is coming from places other than Europe. This is adding to the rich fabric of Canadian society as the country becomes more diverse. In 2016, around 48 percent of the immigrants came from Asia (including the Middle East), while around 27 percent were born in Europe (Statistics Canada, 2017). People from the Caribbean, Bermuda, and Central and South America made up around 11 percent of the foreign-born population, followed by African-born, which comprised 8 percent.

By comparison, in 1986 around 62 percent of the immigrants were born in Europe (including the British Isles), while only around 17 percent were born in Asia. The influx of immigrants from other parts of the world has contributed to the growth of the visible minority population in Canada.

In 2016, there were 7,674,580 visible minorities in Canada, which comprised 22 percent of the entire population of Canada (Statistics Canada, 2017). The number of visible minorities will continue to grow, and it is projected to reach 15,069,000 or around 34 percent of the population in 2036.

In Edmonton, there are 330,035 people of visible minority backgrounds. They primarily come from South Asian, Chinese, Black, Filipino, Latin American, Southeast Asian, Middle Eastern, Korean, and Japanese backgrounds.

# the challenges facing immigrants

## **The settlement of immigrants involves three overlapping stages with each presenting unique challenges to newcomers (Mwarigha, 2002).**

**Surviving:** The settlement starts with newcomers' urgent needs for assistance and reception services after arrival. These include things like food, shelter, language interpretation and instruction, and even orientation about the new country.

**Adapting:** In the intermediate stage, newcomers require assistance on how to access different local or municipal systems and institutions such as legal services, long-term housing, health services, and employment-specific language instruction, to develop skills and connect cultural and lifestyle differences. During this stage, it becomes critical for newcomers to have equitable access to the labour market.

**Integrating:** In the final stage of settlement, newcomers strive to become equal participants in the country's economic, social, cultural, and political life.

Each immigrant arrives in Canada with varied experiences, skills, assets and needs. Some newcomers are in a greater position of disadvantage than others, and therefore face greater settlement challenges. A different starting line on the settlement journey will have an impact on each newcomer's "finish line" as well.

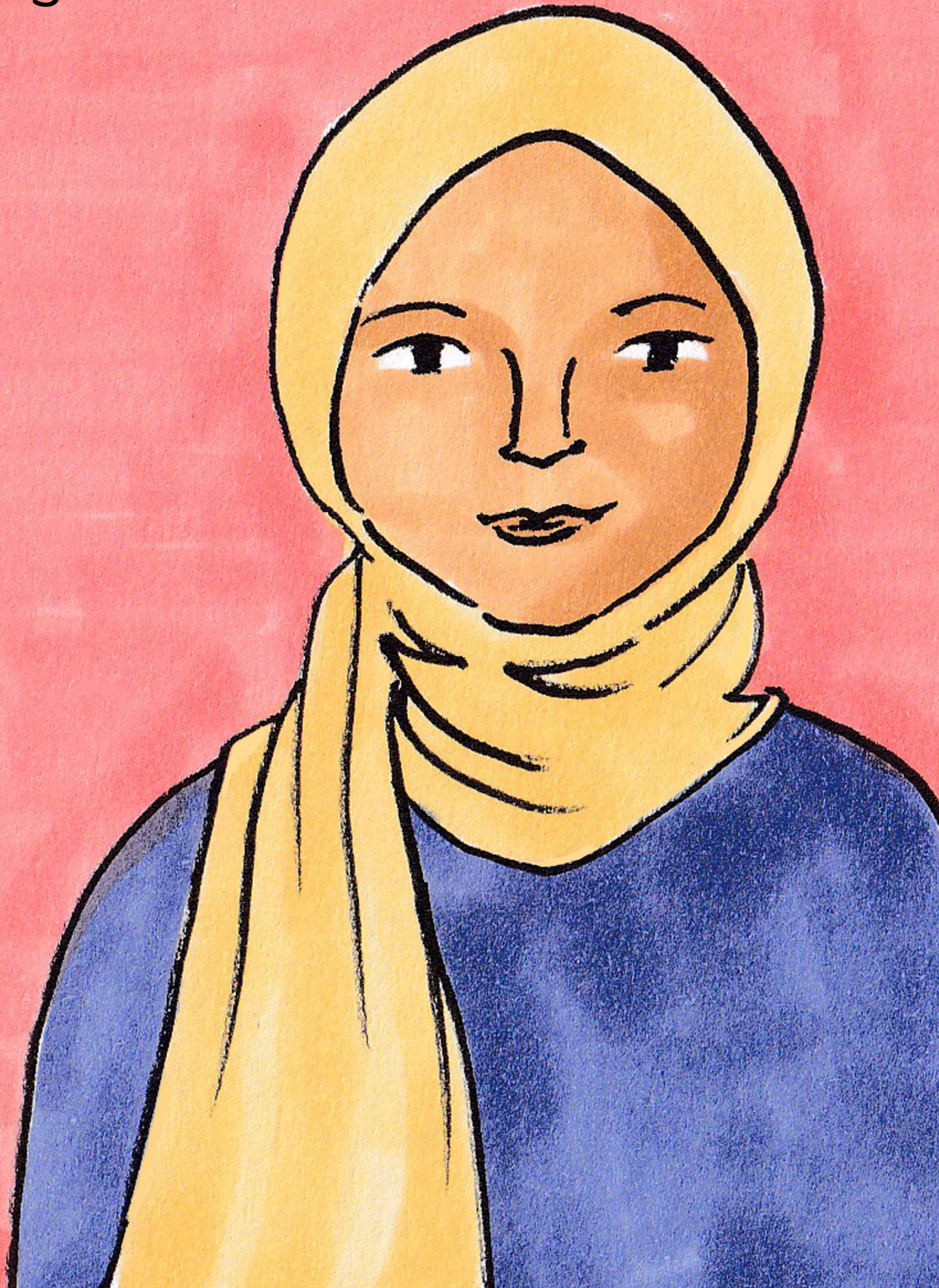
To assist with the settlement process, most federal and provincial programs focus on addressing needs during first stage after arrival. Support services such as translation, childcare, and transportation are extremely important, especially for those who face barriers to access.

However, some of the biggest barriers to successful integration emerge during the intermediate stage of settlement (Mwarigha, 2002; Wayland, 2006).

Sometimes, a lack of recognition of their foreign education credentials and foreign work experience results in immigrants working in lower-paid occupations. Obstacles like language barriers have been found to be correlated with high levels of unemployment and increased poverty (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2021).



**Roni**  
the story  
of a refugee





# background context

## what is a refugee?

The formal definition of a refugee comes from the 1951 Refugee Convention, established by the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR). In simple terms, a refugee is a person who has fled their own country because they are at risk of serious human rights violations, are unable to return, and need protection.

Unlike immigrants, refugees do not choose to settle permanently in another country. They are forced to flee due to war, violence, conflict, or persecution. As a result, they are often ill prepared to come to Canada in terms of fluency in English or French, job qualifications that match the Canadian labour market, and connections with family members and other social supports in Canada.

On the international stage, Canada's refugee protection system has been described as a global role model. Canada resettled the highest number of refugees in 2018 and remained the world leader in 2019, resettling 30,000 refugees (IRCC, 2020)

In Canada, refugees may be government assisted or privately sponsored. In addition, some people apply for asylum while in Canada.

Government assisted refugees are referred to Canada for resettlement by the United Nations Refugee Agency or another referral organization. Individuals cannot apply directly. Refugees receive federal government benefits for up to one year after their arrival to help them settle in their new home.

Even with this support, refugees face many challenges when it comes to accessing adequate services such as employment, housing, language training, schooling, and mental and physical health.

Government assisted refugees often experience more barriers to labour market entry since they frequently have little to no formal education (because of years living in refugee camps or being displaced) and limited official language capacity.

In the remainder of this report, we will share the composite stories of three families. Each story will start with their pre-migration experiences before exploring their journeys through childcare.

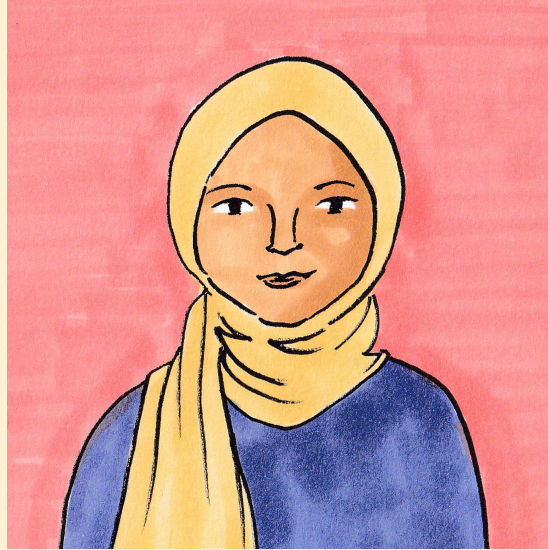
## pre-migration history & settlement experiences

### My name is Roni, meaning 'daylight' in the Kurdish language.

I am a mother of 4 children. One is 3 years old and the other two are 5 years and 8 years old. I also have a toddler who is 6 months old. I myself am 25 years old. I fled the war in Syria with my three children.

I got married and had my first child at the age of 17 years. My husband was older than me and very strict and had traditional expectations of me as a wife and a mother. We lived in a refugee camp for about three years before we came to Canada.

We are happy to live here safely. My younger brother and my father went missing while we were living during the war. I believe they may have been killed. I have lost so many family members over the years and what my children and I have witnessed before coming to Canada, no one can even imagine. I was very determined to get my children to a safe place and for them not to experience what my husband and I went through. This hope was the only thing that kept me alive.



Life as a child growing up was hard. I was born in a country where I was a second-class citizen. I was not allowed to speak the language of my community, Kurdish, as a child. I was made to feel unwanted and inferior because of my ethnic identity and name. At school, I was treated badly by teachers and classmates because of who I was. Therefore, school was never a happy place for me and my siblings.

When we arrived in Canada, life was tough. We did not speak English. Also, my family was physically and emotionally tired because of living in a war and then the refugee camp. My two older children would get scared to be alone at night in the two-bedroom apartment we were provided by the government. Any loud noise, especially police car sirens, would scare them.



**“It is hard for other[s] who [have] never been in our life to understand what we went through and what we are going through.”**

Arabic/Kurdish parent





I did not know anyone, and no one was there to answer any questions or provide any information. As government-sponsored refugees we were given housing and federal support for the first year and thankfully, we did not have to pay back the costs for the flights and settlement. However, because of language barriers and being placed in a neighbourhood where there were no families like us, we did not have access to information, especially regarding schooling and childcare.

We arrived from a place where the school system was broken and then our children did not have any schooling at the refugee camp. We did not even know anything about daycares or preschools. No one told us about them. We had no relations, no language, and no guidance. At home, things were not better either. My husband got more aggressive and he would take out his frustrations on me.



One day while buying groceries, I heard someone speak in Kurdish on the phone. I went up to them and talked to them. I shared my story and learned that they had experienced similar circumstances. They also mentioned how the Edmonton Mennonite Centre assisted them. The Mennonite Centre told us about a parenting group for Kurdish community. A few days later, a broker from the Multicultural Health Brokers called me and invited me to a family group the week after.

All of us attended the program that we sang Kurdish songs and shared our stories. This was the first time, my children and I spoke Kurdish outside of our new home and the whole time I had tears running down my face, as I saw my children chatting and playing with new friends. I feel so lucky that I happened to meet that person in the grocery store that day.

As my husband started to look for work, the community broker helped me to get on the English as a second language class (ESL) waitlist. The community broker also suggested that I should start looking for a day care for my younger son, Hiwa ("hope" in Kurdish). He seemed to have been throwing things, banging his head on the walls and it was very hard to console him when he was upset. It was difficult for me to manage his behavioural and emotional needs. I was isolated and needed support to cater to the emotional needs of my child.



# journey through childcare

Since I was not attending an ESL class at the moment, I was not eligible for any subsidy. The only other way for me to access daycare in an affordable way was through medical grounds and verification from a doctor or a social worker. The broker helped me to connect to a family doctor, who then wrote me a medical letter to get a subsidy.

Finding a daycare was hard, especially since I did not speak English and picking Hiwa up and dropping him off was hard with the daycare located far from our apartment and I was pregnant. The daycare we found was not friendly, but this was the nearest one from our place. I could feel that every morning my child was refusing to go to school. Many times, the teacher was calling the landlord to contact me to pick my son, who was either not behaving or sick or got into a fight with someone.

Hiwa would sometimes come home and say to me: "Mamma, how come nobody likes me? Why do the teachers get mad at me, even though it is the other children that pick fights with me and tease me for not speaking their language?"

I was so sad that my child's life is not different than what I had. It broke my heart, to see my young child not accepted and us not being understood by his teachers.



Eventually, with the help of a MCHB broker we were able to find a community member daycare, with the hope that it will be easier for me to communicate with the person and my child can get good service. But then I gave birth, and it was hard for me to take him to the daycare and the father did not cooperate. I decided to stay home and take care of my newborn baby and other child. As a result, I also lost the subsidy for Hiwa for daycare, since now I was a full-time parent.

If you ask me, my deepest hope is that my children are allowed to be who they are. They are confident to speak their language and are confident citizens. I want them to be confident about themselves and their family and their identity. I also want them to be kind-hearted and loving. I want my sons not to be always stressed and reactive. I want them to be kind and caring towards themselves, towards others and especially towards their partners. I want my daughters to be happy, emotionally and mentally. Happy to be who they are and who they are with.



Finding daycare, preschool or even regular school is not easy for us refugees. When we first arrived, we came from a place where the school system was broken or we had no school at all for our children. In addition, many a times we have no language and people to guide us. In my case, I was blessed to find MCHB and a broker at the right place and the right time.

The idea of having Hiwa join a daycare and have a place to move, play and regulate his emotions came from the community broker. Some of the parents from the MCHB's parenting program, who I could now proudly call my friends, encouraged me and even shared names of daycares that their own children attended.

Being able to express my concerns and simply talk to someone in my language, without giving any cultural explanation and context, was like breathing in the open air for a first time after years of being trapped. I felt supported as a person and as a human being. However, the battle of finding the right childcare for Hiwa was far from over.



The broker called several daycares, but because most of them were located further away from my apartment and I could not afford to pay bus fare, on top of being pregnant, there was only one option.

Since I was not enrolled in ESL classes, the challenge was now to access the subsidy program. Zerya, my community broker, having gone through this route multiple times, now had to seek a medical report from a doctor or a social worker to help me access the subsidy program. The challenge was, where do I find someone who understands my family situation and empathizes with Hiwa's social and emotional needs.

Just when I was starting to feel a sense of having a community and relationships around me, once again I felt I was isolated, and the system needed proof that I existed and was in need. After few weeks of waiting, Zerya was able to request a family doctor, who she had worked with before to help me write a letter. Once the letter was written, Zerya explained that the approval for subsidy would take anywhere between 3 to 12 months. Luckily, in a few weeks the manager called Zerya and asked us to come for registration the next week. Zerya explained our circumstances and family experience and listed herself as an emergency contact. I was sitting in that meeting just admiring the room and the different toys and large space that Hiwa will get to play in everyday and listening to my guardian angel, Zerya being my voice and advocate to the daycare manager.

As Zerya shared our personal information, I was uncomfortable and even uneasy. During the civil war, I had always warned my children never to share any information and not to talk to any strangers. Today, I was handing over my Hiwa to a person who I had met for the first time, who did not know me or my Hiwa and who would not be able to understand my Hiwa. Was I doing the right thing? Would my child be safe here? I was too intimidated by the manager and so burdened by the struggles it took to find and qualify for this place, that I kept my mouth shut and my fears locked up.

**“This system needs awareness about the refugee population, about the children who are born and raised in war zones, it is the only way for this system to raise children for a safe future for the child and for Canada.”**

Arabic/Kurdish parent

**My typical day starts very early in the morning. I usually I get up at 4:30 AM to start preparing for the day ahead.**

Sometimes I am awoken that early by a distressed call from back home from extended family members who are still experiencing the civil war. Every time the phone rings, I fear it might be bad news. Once I have talked back home, I start making meals for my children and my husband. Every time I am cooking, I think of my own mother and grandmother and how I grew up watching them cook these dishes and how cooking and feeding children was how we learned to express love.

Then I wake up my children and get them ready for school and rush them out of the door. Many times, both my husband and I are quite stressed, and due to lack of sleep and worries about our future, our interactions are very reactive.

Sometimes, he would get angry and start yelling at me while I am rushing my children to school.

There have been times when I would forget to wear a jacket or proper shoes or even look at myself in the mirror.



**You would not believe that a couple months ago, there were many days I would realize that I am in my house flip-flops and no jacket halfway down the street, until the minus temperatures would remind me how forgetful I was.**

But then, if I would go back to change, then the children might be late and get in trouble. So, I just keep a happy face and walk alongside them. We walk every day in the minus temperatures and even though it is bitter cold, when I see my children beside me, I feel the warmth of their love and the fact that they are safe and healthy. Our apartment may be small and cramped, our beds have bedbugs but at least I know that they are with me and safe from harm.



I always have mixed feelings dropping off Hiwa at the childcare. The teachers tell me to just leave right away to make it easier on him, but I can feel that he needs me to stay. One time, I tried taking off his heavy winter coat for him and the teacher seemed upset. She said something about independence. I am not sure if I did something wrong or was unzipping it incorrectly. At home, every time I am the one who takes off my children's jacket adoringly. I do not have the words or courage to tell the teacher to please let me say goodbye properly. Let me make sure my son is settled and hold and kiss my baby boy. As I leave him, I feel I cannot hold onto anything, I feel as if I am alone in a desert.

As I make my way back, I think about how Hiwa's day would go. Would he eat enough? Would he feel that the teacher does not like him? As I return home and do my house chores, many times I would get a call from the landlord or Zerya to go early and pick up Hiwa, because either he is sick or there has been a behavioural problem or he has been crying inconsolably. I feel bad for the childcare teachers too. So few teachers for so many children. No wonder they are so tired too.

Sometimes, Zerya comes with me to pick up Hiwa, just so I can understand why he is being sent home early. Sometimes, I go alone. A few times, I have been late to pick up Hiwa and the teacher threatened that they will call Children's Services. That makes me very scared. Zerya has tried explaining to them that I sometimes have other children who I look after, and it might take time for pick up and not to call Children Services. When I do arrive at the childcare, the teacher tells me how Hiwa was crying the whole time or how he hurt another child. My Hiwa is a kind child, but I don't know what happens to him.

As I walk home with my child and my children in the dark, I think about a lot of things. I think about how my older child is being bullied by other children. How my Hiwa is 'trouble' and cries all the time. I think about our neighbourhood and whether it is safe. I think about my own school days and now my children's school experience. I feel so tired and distressed and I feel the system is not for people like us.

**“It is just not easy to be a parent in a place when you have no language, not understand the system, cannot communicate with a system that has so much power.”**

Arabic/Kurdish-speaking parent

# narrative threads & insights

## Roni's story highlights several key themes that surfaced during the focus groups with parents.



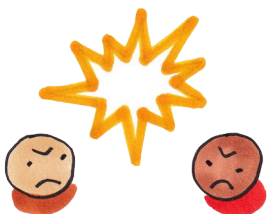
Many current services operate in ways that are not responsive to the cultural needs and cultural assets of newcomer communities. When important everyday cultural experiences are not recognized, children and families can feel undervalued and excluded. This creates distance.



Language barriers can make it difficult for parents to communicate their needs, leading to disempowerment and distress.



Relationships and trust matter, especially for families who have experienced displacement and trauma. The worldviews and biases of dominant culture pose significant barriers to the participation of ethnocultural communities. In some instances, this contributed to spaces that were not considered to be safe.



The pressures of immigration can create significant stress on individuals, contributing to discord and family breakdown.

**"Language and fear from a mainstream daycare made me to put my baby into a community member daycare, in the hope the language [will] make it easy for me to communicate and get a good service for my baby."**

Arabic/Kurdish-speaking parent



**David & Helen**

parents with a  
special needs child





## pre-migration history & settlement experiences

**Salamat! My name is David and I am a father of two boys, Isaac and Jacob. Isaac is 5 years old and Jacob is 3 years old.**

All of us, including my wife Helen arrived in Edmonton two years from a refugee camp in Sudan.

We left our home in Eritrea five years ago and after witnessing horrific events, we crossed the border and came to Sudan and lived in a refugee camp for years. The journey was physically and emotionally draining.

Jacob was born in the refugee camp. Life in the camp was difficult and uncertain. But then God helped us and we were sponsored by my uncle to come to Canada.

My uncle lives in Edmonton with his wife and children. He, with the help of some members of the Church, sponsored us under the Group of Five sponsorship program. As a result, my wife, myself and the boys were able to enter Canada as refugees.



Although the Church sponsored our papers, it was expected that we would live and be supported by my uncle and his family.

When we learned we were going to Canada, we were very happy and hopeful for a better future for all of us, especially our children. Helen, my wife was very excited that she would learn English and get to work in an office and we would have a stable and safe place to live. We were also very grateful to God that we had my uncle and his family in Edmonton to help us come to Canada.

After we arrived in Edmonton, we lived with my uncle and his family. The first few months were very chaotic. We had to apply for social insurance number, the Alberta Health card, open a bank account, find a family doctor and find a school for Isaac. It was like a roller coaster: not being able to communicate in English; having limited financial resources to afford public transport; and being so unfamiliar with how everything worked. Helen and I felt lost, but very obliged and grateful. My uncle, the people at the Church, and the settlement worker were our biggest supports during these initial months. One of the priorities was learning English to navigate our lives in Canada. We applied to Catholic Social Services for Helen and I to get tested on English so that we could access the LINC program (Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada).

While we were trying to get all the documents and access the LINC class, my uncle was laid off from his job, when the store where he was working closed down. It was financially draining for my uncle to support his immediate family and us.

As a result, after the first three months of our arrival, I was beginning to feel that we were a burden on my uncle and his family. We had to find our own means and support. I started looking for work, because the child benefit tax from the government would not be enough to sustain my family.

Through some people in Church, I was able to find a cleaning job. Thereafter, Helen started the LINC classes and I started working odd hours as a cleaner. The settlement worker at the LINC classes advised us to enrol Jacob in the day-care associated with the LINC classes while Helen attended the English classes all day.



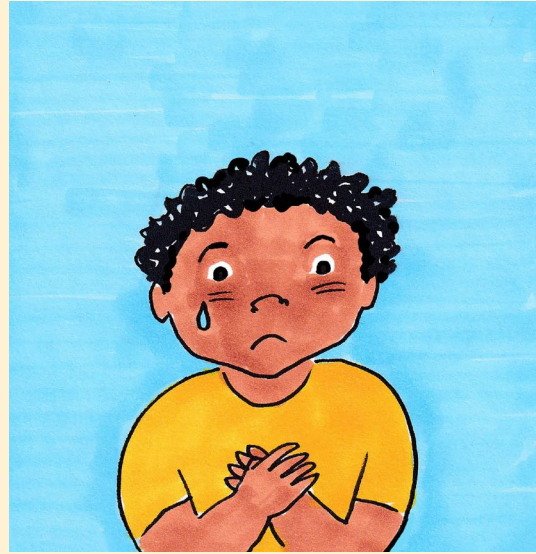
## journey through childcare

Back home there was no concept of child care centre. Our children were raised by the family, immediate and extended, as well, as the community around. If our kids were not listening, neighbours would scold them to behave.

So when we learned that Jacob would be able to attend an early learning and care centre by the LINC classes, Helen and I were both excited yet nervous. Excited because Jacob would make new friends, get lots of toys to play with and it would give Helen a bit of a break. Caring for Jacob was not easy for Helen. Unlike my Isaac, Jacob would get upset very easily as a baby and even a toddler, he would not stop crying for hours.

But before coming to Canada he seemed fine though, something happened to him when we made that journey to Canada. Jacob did not talk until he was two and a half. Simple tasks like brushing teeth, changing clothes was hard.

**He would scream and fidget and not cooperate. Helen would be running after him from morning to evening and many times I would lose my temper because he would not listen or cooperate.**



So you can imagine that as much as we were nervous, it was a blessing that we were able to find childcare through the LINC classes.

Many people in Church asked us how was the daycare offered by LINC? Did we meet the staff? Did we/ compare and visit other childcare centres? To be honest, I did not have any idea about all of this. We were happy by the fact, that we had a place for Jacob to be looked after, while Helen attended LINC classes and I went to work and this place required us to take only one bus.

Although, we were worried about how to pay for this place. How would we afford to buy lunch for Jacob or his diapers to take to school? How can we afford to pay for the bus that will take Helen and Jacob to class and daycare everyday?

The lady at the LINC reception mentioned subsidy to pay for child care and transportation. In order to apply we had to do further paperwork in English for Canada Revenue Agency, to show we were below the minimum income level. We also had to apply for transportation subsidy pass. Sometimes, I really wish we had the superpower to read and write English. Calling and going to so many people and asking them to translate and fill forms for all the programs made me feel lesser than and sometimes I just wanted to not talk to so many people and the programs they worked at. I would be running from one place to another in the harsh cold weather and many times they would hand me pamphlets that were in English. What would these colourful pamphlets with images of people that look like me, do anything for me. I cannot read or write. I just wanted to say something. But even if I did talk, no one in this country would have understood me anyways.

**Many people in Church who had similar experience as our family tell me, we are very lucky and should be thankful to God that at least, I had work, my wife had access to a LINC class and did not stay home and my sons were in school and child care. Not everyone's journey to find a job and childcare was so smooth and easy. In those moments I tried overcoming my frustrations with the hope that at least Jacob will be happier and maybe less fussier.**

**My name is Helen and I am the wife of David and the mother of Isaac and Jacob.**

**Life in Canada is like swimming in an ocean. You keep on swimming otherwise you will sink. I feel so tired and so angry all the time. Tired of swimming.**

I miss the refugee camp. I understand that here in Canada we have peace and we have free health care, but here we are so isolated and just running and go go go all the time.

My day starts very early. I wake up at 4:00 AM to pack lunch and make dinner for the family, so David can leave on time. David has to be at work before six o'clock in the morning, so that he can clean the offices before people start work and then he has to go back again at night once the office are closed. This leaves me to look after our children.

I get my boys ready for school. Waking up Jacob is the hardest. He cries and kicks and then refuses to brush his teeth or get ready. Then we rush outside in the bitter cold for my older son Jacob to catch his school bus. Since David is off to work, I cannot leave Jacob all alone, so I take him outside with me.



Going outside makes him angry and he cries but I rush him. Then once Isaac leaves, I come back inside our apartment to pack our lunches and then leave for the bus stop.

Sometimes, it is so hard to balance getting ready and giving attention to Jacob's needs. So I open the video and give Jacob my phone to play with. I do not have time or the energy to monitor what he is watching.

Dressing him to go outside, is such a challenging task. It is bitter cold in Edmonton and getting Jacob to put on coat and gloves is so hard. He pushes it away. He says he does not like how the coat makes him feel on his body. I try putting it on again and again and he pushes me. I know he does not like wearing the coat, but I do not want my child to feel cold and fall ill.





We then scramble out of the house, with me carrying Jacob because he would not step out of the door and I get worried that we may miss our bus. On the bus everyone looks at me and my crying child as he screams and hits me. But what can I do?

Once I tried to discipline my child, like we do back home, but then David's aunt told me not to do that or otherwise someone will report me and the child service will take him away. I feel I cannot even get angry at my child because the neighbours will complain and I will get judged, or worse...my child will be taken away from me. What kind of country is this, where your neighbours complain about how bad of a parent I am, rather than helping me out? I feel so alone here. Nothing I know works here.

Once I reach the LINC class and the childcare centre, I hand Jacob over to the teacher, who at this point is shrieking and crying. The staff at the LINC childcare centre are very nice and very good. They welcome me with a big smile and I feel that they see me and understand my tiredness and rush. By the time I get to the LINC class I am already so tired.

Once I reach the LINC class and the childcare centre, I hand Jacob over to the teacher, who at this point is shrieking and crying. The staff at the LINC childcare centre are very nice and very good. They welcome me with a big smile and I feel that they see me and understand my tiredness and rush. By the time I get to the LINC class I am already so tired.

**The staff at the childcare centre work very hard. Many times during drop off time and pick up time, they try talking to me. Despite the language barriers, they try explaining things to me and even give advice like where to get a second-hand snow suit. I get a big smile every time I enter the building. I feel I belonged. In my culture they say, don't give a meal to feed but rather give me a smile.**

Several times with the help of translators they have told me that Jacob is quite a handful and it is hard to manage his behaviour with the limited staff. But they are trying and working with him. They would call me in the middle of the class to help change his diaper or sit with him while he ate separately. It was stressful and embarrassing to be called from English classes to deal with my son's screaming and hitting.

One morning one of the staff told me that the supervisor would like to see me after the class and daycare pickup ended. All day long I was worried that they would refuse to take care of my son and that I would have to leave the LINC program and all the hopes our family had would be crushed. What would I say to David and Isaac when I get home? I could not concentrate that day at all.

The supervisor asked a lady from my community who also attended the LINC class to translate what she wanted to say. She told me that at many points in the day she had to dedicate a separate staff to do daily activities and play with Jacob, because he would get angry and throw things and cannot follow basic direction.



She also mentioned that Jacob does not look at people when anyone talks to him, his vocabulary and speech is limited, and he shows little to no interest in other children. Maybe I should talk to my family doctor.

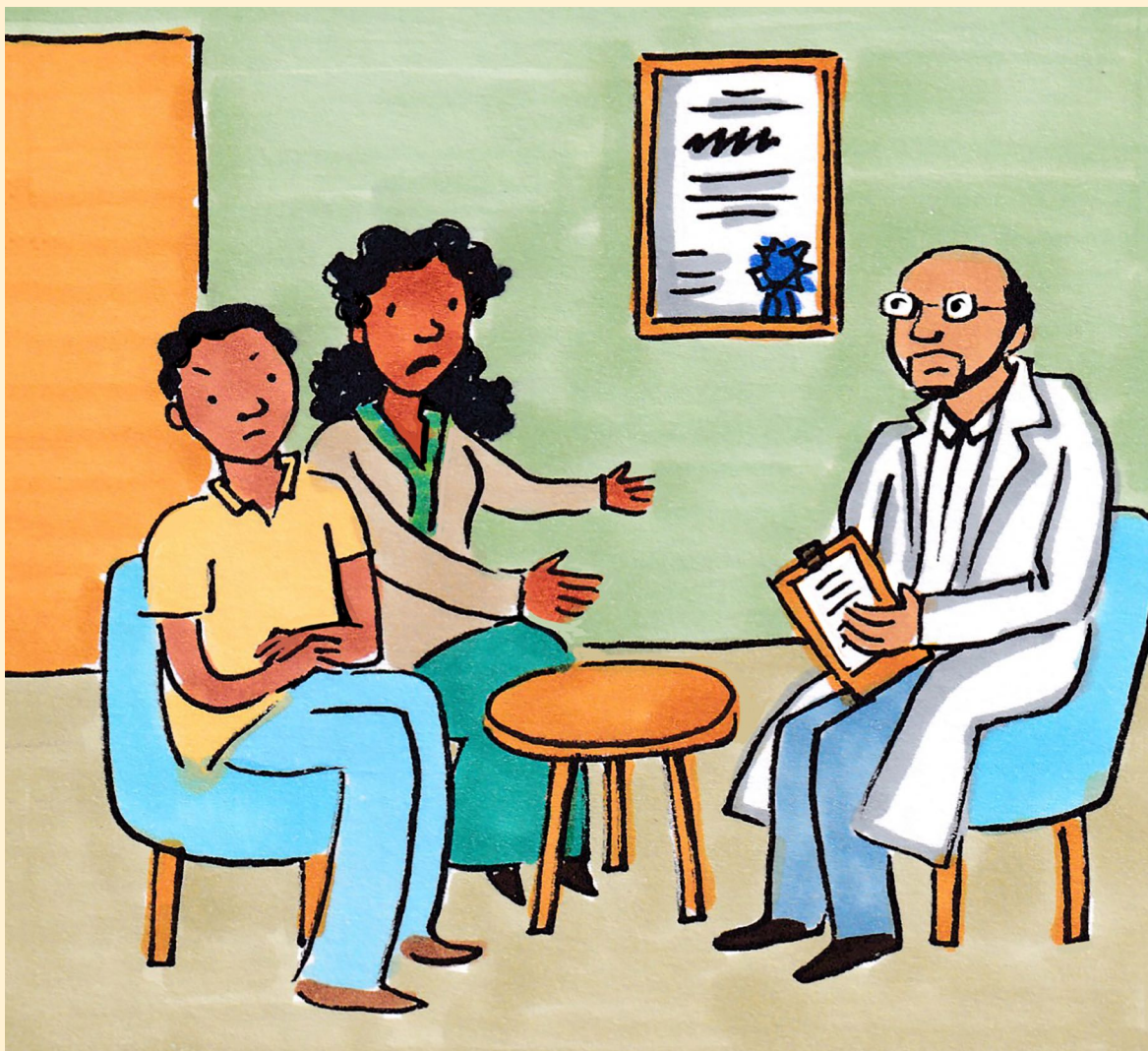
**This made me angry. I try telling her that in my culture it is disrespectful to look at people in the eye and my brother's children back home started talking very late and did not talk until they were five and they were fine. Why do not they understand that maybe Jacob is getting used to this new place and his new home in Canada? Even I am shy to talk to people in my neighbourhood. Maybe, it is being in new surroundings? My Jacob may cry and be difficult but he is just a child in a new place with new people. Why is she blaming my Jacob and my parenting? Why does she keep pushing me to see the doctor and get him checked.**

That day I cried on the way home. When David came home, I told him everything. David listened patiently. I could see the pain and worry on his face. "Well, he does the same at home. Maybe, we should see a doctor and get him checked out."

After few days we were able to see our family doctor and explain to the doctor what the daycare supervisor told us. The family doctor, Dr Niaz an Indian immigrant himself, spent lots of time talking to us and understanding if the same behaviour takes place at home. Towards the end, he said he suspects that Jacob might have a delay and he needs to refer him to a specialist at the Glenrose Rehabilitation Centre, who can do further assessments and maybe give a diagnosis.

David and I were shocked and even angry. I told the doctor that Jacob was fine at the refugee camp and it is in Canada that he has all these behaviour problems. The doctor calmly explained that it is possible that children show signs of developmental delays as they grow up and enter different environments like daycare and schools. It may be that perhaps that all along he had a delay but it started showing more prominently as he interacted with those outside his home. The doctor said there were programs and services to help Jacob even if he is diagnosed.

I didn't want to hear it. I felt so lost and alone. David and I had done everything to make our children's future better but still it was not enough. This country, this city has lots of programs but no real community, no real support. I was scared for my child, for his future. We did special prayers for him at church. I asked my mother back home to do some practices, but it did not cure Jacob or change things in any way.





Eventually, Jacob was diagnosed by the Glenrose as being on the autism spectrum. The daycare supervisor asked David and I to sign some paperwork to get additional support staff to work one-on-one with Jacob. As friendly as the staff is at the daycare, I wish they had a staff who spoke our language and understood our culture and practices.

**Signing of the documents was very stressful and fear-inducing for us, since back home signing papers that you could not read or write meant someone could harm you.**

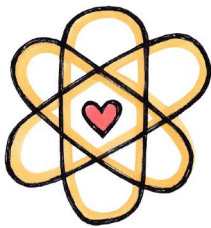
I worry for Jacob, how he will be treated by the world, how his future will be.





# narrative threads & insights

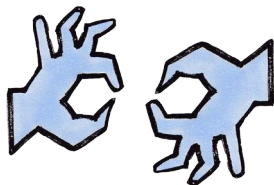
## David and Helen's story highlights several themes that surfaced during the focus groups with parents.



Empathy was recognized as being essential for appreciating the complex experiences and aspirations of ethnocultural and immigrant families. This includes understanding challenges many families face in navigating a bewildering system to access services. Empathy is a bridge to relationships and to mutual understanding - and essential for creating safe spaces for families and children.



Appreciating the pre-migration experiences of parents is especially important. When moving to another country, families rely on their pre-migration knowledge and “back home” experience for navigating early learning and care programs. The new country’s systems will likely be different from those of their home country.



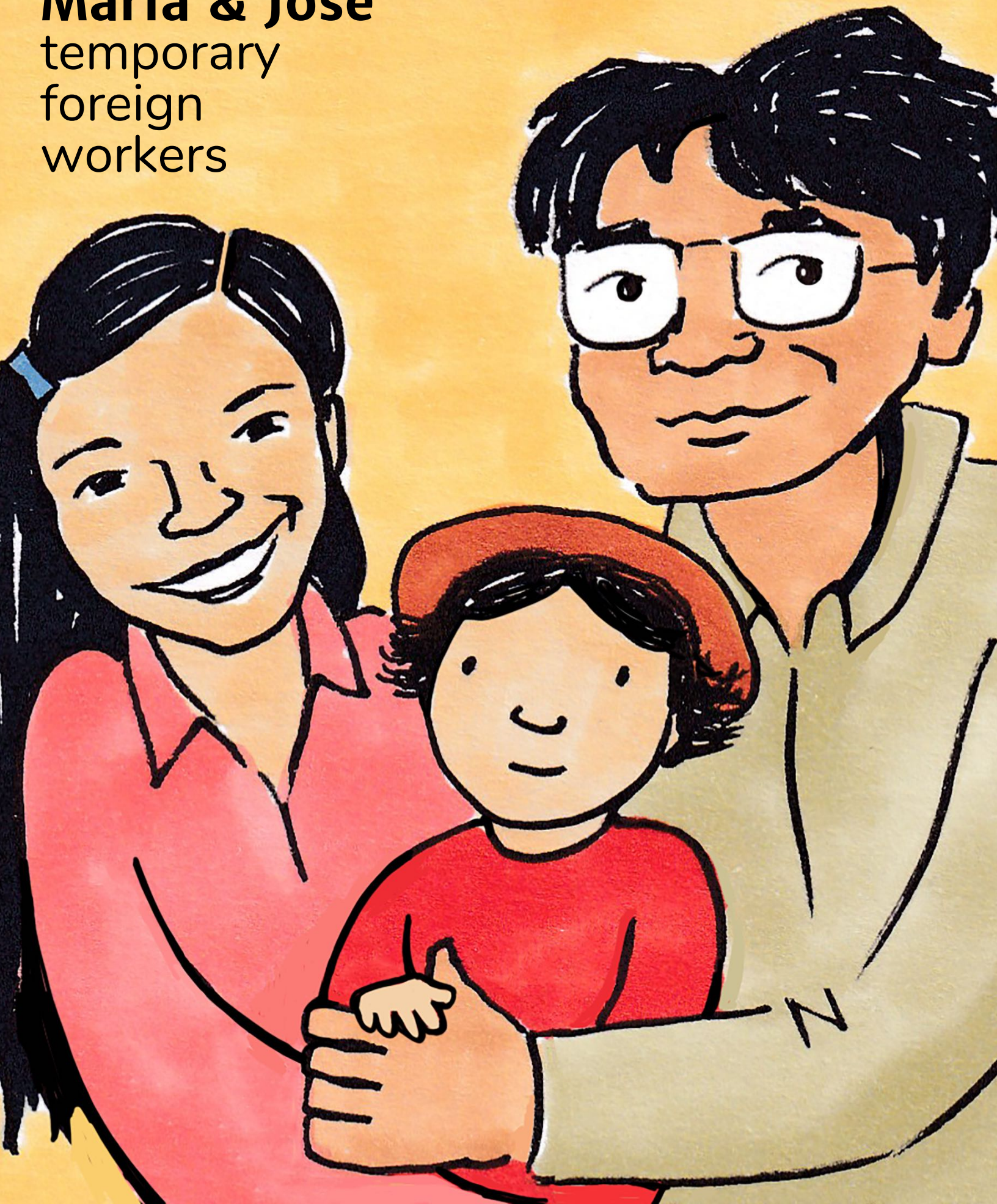
The ability for staff to support children with special needs was highlighted as an important skill by parents. Understanding how adverse pre-migration experiences and trauma may influence behaviour and emotional responses is also important (e.g., becoming anxious when hearing loud noises) for creating safe environments.

**"It is important for the educators to possess ability and experience in teaching children with disability."**

Spanish-speaking parent



**Maria & José**  
temporary  
foreign  
workers





# background context

## what is a temporary foreign worker?

A temporary foreign worker (TFW) in Canada is a foreign national engaged in work activities who is authorized to enter and to remain in Canada for a limited period of time with the proper documentation.

What distinguishes temporary foreign workers from permanent residents is that they cannot remain permanently in Canada. They have limited access to social and economic benefits. They do not have direct access to democratic representation and they may have limited labour mobility because of specific ties to their employer.

The early 2000s were marked by a rapid growth in the number of migrant workers coming to Canada. In response to demands from employer groups, the federal government's expansion of the Temporary Foreign Worker Program to lower-skill occupations led to significant employer interest in using TFWs to address their labour market needs. Alberta employers have embraced the use of temporary foreign workers. The province has the highest number of TFWs per capita in Canada.

TFWs face significant challenges when coming to Canada. Many pay large fees to recruiters. When they arrive, many experience exploitation and racism at the hands of employers and their 'legal' status is frequently at risk.

While TFWs are eligible for benefit programs such as health care, Employment Insurance, and childcare subsidies, this is dependent on them having valid work permits.



## pre-migration history & settlement experiences

**Kamusta! My name is Maria and I am from Philippines. I was a registered nurse back home. To give a better future to my family, I moved to Canada 2 years ago. I am 30 years old and have a husband, José and a daughter, Grace, who is two-and-a-half.**

Back home, I had a good life. I was a clinical instructor for the school of nursing during the day and spent my evenings with family and friends, enjoying the local cuisines. My husband was an engineer and worked at a renowned engineering firm. Life was good.

But José and I wanted to have children and I wanted a better future for my children. A future where they could study at good schools and university and be happy and chase their dreams.



As a result, I applied through a local agency as a temporary foreign worker (TFW) to find some relevant work in Canada. Since, I had a long distance relative in Edmonton and I had heard that the cost of living was cheaper in Alberta compared to cities like Vancouver, I asked the agency to find me a job in Edmonton. It took 2 years for the processing of paper and lots of money, but I was able to find a job as a live-in caregiver and left my husband and daughter to come to Edmonton.

As a live-in caregiver, you live in the employer's place of residence and are provided food and boarding. The food that was available and offered was not my food. There were no vegetables or fish that I was used to and I was not allowed to prepare my own food.

After a year of using up all our savings and some debt, I was able to call my husband and daughter to join me in Edmonton. José was granted an open permit, but they could not live with me, so we had to find some housing arrangement for them. After asking around in the Filipino community, we were able to find a room in a house shared by many other temporary foreign workers from Philippines. The rent for the room was \$500 per month. This small room became our first home in Canada and I would come visit my husband and daughter every weekend. The space was small and tight, but at least our hearts were full.

After searching for a few weeks, José was able to find full time work at Tim Hortons. This meant he had to be at Tim Hortons from 8:00 AM in the morning to 4:00 PM. Grace was still at home with him, so she had to enrol in childcare, since neither I nor José were at home to look after her.

## journey through childcare

**My name is José. I am Maria's husband and the father to our daughter, Grace. I live with Grace in a house shared by 8 other temporary foreign workers. The house is hectic in morning, because everyone is taking turns to use the bathroom and to make breakfast in the kitchen.**

Grace gives me a hard time as I hurry to get her ready. The more I try to rush her, the slower she moves. She can be very stubborn.

It is our first winter in Edmonton and it has been a shock. I think back to how I used drive to my car to my engineering job in the Philippines in comfort. And now, I am pushing Grace in a flimsy stroller through the snow to catch the bus.

Everything has been such an adjustment. I didn't even know how to dress or feed my daughter in the beginning and now I feel like a single parent.



I know that Maria misses her daughter. It is difficult for both of us, especially since Grace is growing up so quickly.

At least, the day care is close to us. It is only 5 minutes away by bus and the staff are nice. They always welcome me with big smile. I know she is well cared for there.

In the evening, I am so tired when I get home that I just want to watch TV with my housemates. But first, I must make a quick meal for Grace. I know I should play with her too, but sometimes I just give her my phone and let her watch cartoons.

I look forward to the weekends when we can be a family. On weekends, Grace gets to see her mother Maria and we spend time together. Sometimes, we go to the mall and then Grace gets to choose a toy from the Dollar Store.



Most Sundays we go to Church together. I know that Maria feels that Grace is not as close to her as she is to me. I even notice that Grace does little things like reaching for my hand at the mall, rather than for her mother's. Or she offers me a piece of food instead of Maria. It makes Maria sad that she is working so hard for a better life, but she feels like she is losing closeness with her daughter.

But I think Grace is adjusting well to life in Canada. She is very resilient. She is happy to go to daycare since she does not have anyone around her age in the house. It is nice for her to have the toys and friends at the daycare.

Maria and I try to make ends meet. We often think about having Grace stay at the house where I live and asking one of the other TFWs to watch her so that we can save the cost of daycare. If we did this, we would save money, but we worry about her safety and education. We just want the best for our daughter.



# narrative threads & insights

## Maria and José's story highlights several themes that surfaced during the focus groups with parents.



Adapting to a new sociocultural and economic context can have profound impacts on family dynamics, especially if there is significant distance between their home culture and the culture of the larger community.

This can create shifts in family structures, traditional gender roles, parenting responsibilities, and child-parent relationships. In some instances, these changes can lead migrants to experience a sense of loss, disempowerment, and distress - and this can disrupt relationships in the family.



Economic pressures are important sources of stress on many ethnocultural families. Many immigrant parents are challenged to secure jobs that pay living wages with benefits.

Paying for childcare is a significant financial burden for many families given the high fees in Alberta. Affordability is a real concern.

Some immigrant parents, especially women, may struggle to join the labour market and choose to care for their children at home, which impacts the economic prospects of their family.

**"A daycare in south side of Edmonton would cost me about \$900 a month and a daycare in another location would cost higher than \$1000 a month. ... [And] because we have 2 kids in daycare, half our income goes to daycare fees."**

Bhutanese parent

# weaving it all together

## from stories to opportunities

**“I hope my child to be a true kind human, someone that makes life beautiful for himself and others.”**

### **Arabic/Kurdish-speaking parent**

The stories of Roni, David and Helen, and Maria and José speak to the deep commitment parents have to raising their children to be healthy, happy, and proud of who they are. They also speak to the aspirations of ethnocultural families to be full participants in the social and economic life of Edmonton.

While the stories bring attention to the struggles many families experience in accessing appropriate childcare, they also illuminate the resiliency and cultural wealth ethnocultural families have to offer to the larger society.

They reveal what might be possible if we embraced an intercultural spirit of mutual respect, learning from one another, and equality between social groups.

Imagine the possibility of childcare programs where different ways of knowing are woven together to create spaces where all children thrive.

Imagine a multi-coloured tapestry where the unique identities and gifts of our children are preserved and celebrated, while creating a pattern that is deeper and richer than the sum of its parts.

But how might we get there? And what role might childcare play in supporting this transformation?

During the Journeys Project, ethnocultural families identified a number of pathways to change. These pathways point the direction for future engagement and advocacy to shift policies and practices in the early learning and childcare system. There is much more work to be done, but the areas of potential focus are becoming clearer.



## empowering parents

Parents from ethnocultural communities expressed a desire to be included in the education process and to contribute their talents and cultural wealth towards the betterment of the childcare system.

For example, families could contribute to the design of cultural kits that comprise songs, stories, games and recipes from their home culture and in their home language.

Imagine the impact on a child in the classroom, when the song that her mother sings to her at home is sung during the morning circle or the food that she eats at home is served at her daycare.

## supporting language & culture

Parents in the Journeys Project aspired for their children to be in environments where their home language and cultural identities were nurtured.

They hoped for their children to learn about, retain, and be proud of their home culture, including their language, values, and in some cases, religion.

## facilitating inclusion & belonging

Parents yearn to be in environments where they feel welcomed and appreciated - and where they can share their experiences. Parent groups, for example, create places of belonging and mutual support.

## improving access & navigation

Parents identified the importance of improving access to childcare. This includes investing in wayfinding and system navigators to help parents access childcare services; reducing language-related barriers for newcomer families; and addressing issues of affordability.

## advancing equity

Parents identified that the childcare system needs to address issues of equity and discrimination. Practice and policy changes are required.

This may mean hiring staff who speak multiple languages, making the credentialing process easier for those who come from diverse backgrounds to work in the field of early learning and care or investing in resources to promote multilingualism and cultural wealth of families.

Resources like the RAISED model (Georgis et al., 2017) and the Flight curriculum (Makovichuk et al., 2014) provide frameworks for ensuring that values of equity and respect are embedded in policies and practices.

## changing policies & practices

**"As our child adapts and learns mainstream Canadian culture and language, we have encountered challenges to introduce our own cultural language and heritage.**

**We, as parents, are worried about this cultural disconnection.**

**This has also created a generational gap between children and grandparents.**

**Loss of language and culture can lead to loss of roots."**

Bhutanese parent

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