

The Role of Neighbourhood Houses in Newcomer Settlement and Citizenship Training

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Context: Neighbourhood Houses and Citizenship

- The Canadian Neighbourhood House (NH) movement was inspired by Jane Addams' Hull-House Settlement in Chicago, Illinois, and oriented toward the social and economic integration of newcomers.
- Contemporary NHs continue to serve "many of the invisible poor from new immigrant families, underprivileged families unable to provide breakfast to their children, youth who lack leadership and are on the street and seniors living alone with no family ties" (Association of Neighbourhood Houses British Columbia 2013).
- The first Neighbourhood House in Vancouver, BC, was founded in 1938. More than 100,000 people per year participate in free or low-cost programming at the eight organizations that make up the Association of Neighbourhood Houses of British Columbia.
- The 'civil element' of citizenship includes a set of rights and responsibilities; however, the 'social element' is equally important to the civil element. The 'social element' of citizenship refers to one's sense of membership and belonging within a community regardless of the economic inequalities that might exist between its members (Marshall 1950).
 - The asset- and place-based approaches that inform Neighbourhood House activities encourage program participants to become volunteers; everyone has something to contribute and something to learn (McKnight and Block 2010).
 - Volunteers gain exposure to cultural nuances and experience working in a multicultural setting.
 - Volunteering is a form of civic engagement that invokes a sense of belonging and promotes intercultural understanding (Sandercock 2009).
- "Citizenship flourishes through social, cultural and political organizations that fulfil public purposes" (O'Neill 2004, p. 73).

Key Themes and Quotes

- **None** of the program participants, including those with legal Canadian citizenship status, felt 'Canadian' at the beginning of the employment and leadership skills program.
- The program organizers and Neighbourhood House staff were intentional in their efforts to create social ties among the program participants, the organization and broader community, and did so by encouraging and supporting women to take on leadership roles within the program, Neighbourhood House activities and city-wide initiatives.

"I used to always say that I am not Canadian, they are Canadian. Like kind of divided myself. But now, I'm Canadian as well! Like [the facilitator] told us, you are Canadian as well. Everybody is an immigrant! So, I stopped saying 'Canadian' and just saying 'people' like 'those people,' who has racism or... yeah, so. I don't know when I changed, but all of a sudden I changed. I keep coming to the courses and all of a sudden I saw – oh, there's not much different between us. Yeah, just because we are immigrants doesn't mean we can't succeed or something. Lots of people also, yeah, succeed, as well. You just have to believe in yourself and focus on what you want to do and what you want to be."

- Chiyo, from Japan

- Participants described the Neighbourhood House as a "home" to them, where "everybody is family" (Amita, from Bangladesh). This experience of **belonging** encouraged participants and provided them with the courage to engage with their neighbours and participate in their children's schools.

"I know I can ask for the support of any women and I am supporting the women in my [apartment] building. Sometimes we get together and we discuss our problems or something, and then I feel that I have something to say about this, how they can deal with it, their daughter or their friends or their families. I try to support them. I developed these skills through the program because before I didn't do it. Because when I did the program here, I got ideas that were useful to me and I thought they might be useful for others too, so I try. I feel I have to tell them – they can take it or not."

- Jadira, from Bangladesh

"The program steps into citizenship building because of that engagement in community. It's not just connection to community. **It's engagement.** Then it's also about employment. It's saying, 'Let's assess what your strengths and weaknesses are, what your skills are. Let's marry that with what you want to do and can do. What are the steps to get there?' That's employment."

- Tamara, external consultant

"I think the thing with the program is that it came from women saying, 'We're having a hard time. We can't get a program that looks after our kids. We need more support.' And then going out, actually, and finding funding for the program. So, it works, because it's what the participants identified and it's driven by them through the whole program [...]"

My idea is to work myself out of a job [...] I was fortunate to come from a place where I had lots of education and life experience, I could step into the job and do either frontline or the administrative stuff. But my goal is to get people from community to that level where they're doing it."

- Rebecca, Neighbourhood House staff

- Program participants described how powerful it was for them to learn that they were not alone in their integration struggles, and how being **connected** to others improved their **well-being**.

"I enjoyed it [the program]. Because I know something new. I like to meet more people. And I feel better, because sometimes I think, oh, I am the only one feeling this is hard, this does not happen to other people, but now I know this is not true, no? My experience is the same one as it is for other women. And sometimes women who have a lot of years here, but [are still] feeling lost here. So I am not in that situation."

- Jennifer, from Peru

The Project

Purpose:

To examine the experiences of women who have immigrated to Canada and are participating in an employment and leadership skills program at two Vancouver, BC, Neighbourhood Houses.

Research Questions:

1. In what ways do Neighbourhood Houses differ from other immigrant-service agencies?
2. What does 'citizenship' mean to newcomers?
3. What kinds of citizenship training do Neighbourhood Houses provide?

Methods:

- 31 sessions of ethnographic participant observation in a 16-week employment and leadership skills program at two Vancouver Neighbourhood Houses. Fieldwork started in September 2013 and ended in April 2014. Jottings were transcribed into fieldnotes, which were coded and thematically analyzed.
- 41 in-depth qualitative interviews with program participants (n=31), Neighbourhood House staff (n=6), program consultants (n=2), the program facilitator (n=1), and an employee of the philanthropic funding organization (n=1). Audio-recordings were transcribed, coded and thematically analyzed.

Demographics:

All program participants were visible minority women who had migrated from a range of countries, including Mexico, China, Peru, Bangladesh, Japan, Korea, Thailand, the Philippines, Colombia, and Chile. Two of the Neighbourhood House staff members, one of the external consultants and the employee of the funder were born in Canada. Four of the Neighbourhood House staff members, one of the external consultants and the program facilitator were immigrants.

Conclusion

- Program participants identified 'Canadian' to mean 'white' and native-born; in order to see themselves as Canadian citizens, the participants had to redefine the term in the context of Canada's history as a colonial, immigrant-receiving and multicultural nation.
- Neighbourhood Houses are welcoming spaces where newcomers can connect to resources and support; yet, **service-provision is just an entry point**. NHs support newcomers in developing initiatives that engage with their communities and make use of their skills and interests.
- Asset- and place-based approaches are especially productive for newcomers who have experienced difficulty transitioning into the Canadian labour market. Holistic programs that emphasize skills over deficits are critical in validating newcomers' economic, cultural, political capital.
- "The vulnerable and the poor, especially their children, are not helped by rights they have no habit of exercising – let alone being able to afford their legal costs. Ordinary people and children need civic institutions that underwrite citizenship and its everyday world without fanciful exhortations to participation, reflexivity, and endless mobilization" (O'Neill 2004, p. 93). Neighbourhood Houses are an example of such institutions.

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