

Exploring Belonging and Identity Formulation among Youths from Refugee
Backgrounds through Social Activism
during the Making Worcester Home Youth Participatory Action Research.

by
Craig Mortley

A Thesis Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Science

Approved July 2022 by the
Graduate Supervisory Committee:

Angela Arzubiaga, Chair
Nilda Flores-Gonzalez
Vera Lopez

ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

August 2022

ABSTRACT

This qualitative exploratory study examined how young people from refugee backgrounds were formulating thoughts on a sense of belonging, and social change through activism, during their participation in the Making Worcester Home youth participatory action research (YPAR) project. Nineteen young people from refugee backgrounds participated in the project, sixteen were in high school, and three were first-year college students. The study employed a narrative perspective premised on a postmodern social constructivist model. This study gathered data from students' class journal entries, transcriptions from interviews conducted by the students, class discussions, interview questions for their YPAR projects, and final project presentations. Inductive content analysis was used to code the data, and emerging themes were recorded. Six themes described the participants' formulation of a sense of belonging, 1) spatial belonging - relationship to place, 2) intersectionality and social location, 3) boundaries - inclusion and exclusion, 4) dual identities - ethnic, 5) feeling supported and well resourced, and 6) belonging through activism and community change. The emerging themes are discussed in context to existing migration and transdisciplinary scholarship on belonging to determine how new thoughts on newcomer belonging might be formulated. The study highlights several critical considerations that educational institutions, community-based organizations, and cities can adopt to support young people from refugee backgrounds to achieve a sense of belonging.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the Urban Action Institute & Urban Studies Department of Worcester State University (WSU) in Worcester, Massachusetts, and Dr. Adam Saltsman for including me in this Making Worcester Home Project and allowing me to use the data for this study. I thank my thesis committee, Professor Angela Arzubiaga, my chair, and Professors Nilda Flores-Gonzalez and Vera Lopez for their guidance, time, advice, and recommendation in completing this thesis. I am grateful for the youth who volunteered and generously participated in the Making Worcester Home project, without whose expertise this project would not be possible.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

According to Maslow's motivational theory on the hierarchy of human needs, a sense of belonging is often considered an essential human characteristic (Maslow, 1987). Research on belonging for refugee youth and settled young people who are children of refugees is sparse. The concept of belonging is complex, challenging to define and has no uniform definition across disciplines (Anthias, 2006; Antonsich, 2010). However, some common features of the construct of belonging consistent across different disciplines include fluidity, intersectionality, socially negotiated, and connections to place and material things (Anthias, 2006; Antonsich, 2010; Lahdesmaki et al., 2016; Mahar et al., 2013). The concept for some refugees is complex and complicated because of experiences with isolation, discrimination, separation, and loss in their countries of origin, during displacement, resettling, and integration into their resettled countries (Ager & Strang, 2004).

Therefore, many people from forced migration backgrounds do not feel belonging to either their country of origin or their resettled country. Previous research has indicated that social connections are critical in mitigating post-migration challenges, and many refugees and resettlement agencies have identified a sense of belonging as a critical indicator for successful integration (Ager & Strang, 2004; Hogarth, 2011; Kovacev & Shute, 2004; Simich, Beiser, & Mawani, 2003). Refugee receiving countries and resettlement programs often use indicators of a sense of belonging to determine integration and monitor the contributions of newcomer communities.

A sense of belonging fits into broader theoretical concepts within migration literature and is often used as an empirical indicator of integration. Belonging is an integral part of citizenship theory which focuses on legal immigration status, civic participation, rights, and a sense of belonging. It is also an important dimension and indicator for other broad desired societal outcomes of social inclusion/exclusion, social cohesion, social capital, nationhood, and wellbeing. Previous research on a sense of belonging uses questions that include the phrase sense of belonging to determine the degree of feelings. Words such as identity, pride, trust, identification, and connection to institutions measure belonging (Ager & Strang, 2004).

Establishing a sense of belonging is critical for adolescents, especially within immigrant households; having a sense of belonging to their resettled countries is not guaranteed even with legal immigration status and citizenship. For many, feeling unbelonging is a constant struggle (Hogarth, 2011, p. 70). Many immigrants struggle with unbelonging being labeled foreigners, which is often a lifelong designation because they cannot pass (assimilate) due to culture, language, or race. For this study, unbelonging is defined as the process through which society limits immigrants' and newcomers' sense of belonging through exclusion. It involves the creation of boundaries, limits a sense of belonging to places, socially fixes people to peripheral areas, and exclusion from full socio-legal participation in society. This exclusion can persist irrespective of whether individuals feel a sense of belonging to their resettled countries or have access to formal belonging to the state, such as legal immigration status or citizenship (Christensen, 2009).

Feelings of belonging for displaced people such as refugees have unique dimensions because of the loss of their original homes and feelings of detachment in their

resettled environments. Many immigrants live in environments that provide minimal support for integration; because of this, older generations will often hold on to their identities from their countries of origin and consider themselves foreigners in their new homes. Their countries of origin and nationality become even more significant and tied to their sense of belonging, which is often embodied through cultural retention such as music, food, dance, and language (Erikson, 1959). These dynamics within immigrant families often create mixed messages about belonging for young people. Some immigrant and second-generation youth from immigrant backgrounds reported hearing from family members not to become too much like their resettled home because they might not fit into or betray their ethnic communities. Others report not being enough for either culture; for example, immigrants reported not being American enough to fit into American society while also experiencing significant cultural shifts that place them at disparity with their own cultures that accuse them of being too Americanized (Brar-Josan, 2015, p. 1).

Belonging and home are often inextricably linked to identity for many immigrants; as such many reconstruct perceptions of their original home after being resettled as part of reclaiming their identity (Brar-Josan, 2015). Home is conceptualized as spatial, emotional, and social for this research (Fadlalla, 2011). Spatial refers to the quotidian physical space immigrants occupy and navigate, including dwelling places. The emotional aspect speaks more to their sense of attachment, security, ownership, and belonging; this involves processing trauma associated with displacement and resettlement to develop an attachment to a new space. The social aspect involves narratives of home, memories of home lost or changed, constructs of an imagined or ideal home, and relationships to people and structures in their resettled space. Considering all these

aspects, home can be conceptualized as an adaptation to a new place while incorporating the old and the imagined aspects to develop a sense of belonging, attachment, and integration into the new environment (Taylor, 2013).

This chapter serves as an introduction to the study. It includes the statement of the problem, research questions, the rationale for the study, potential contributions to the study of forced migration and justice studies as well as my positionality as a researcher. Chapter 2 covers the literature review and analyzes existing literature on newcomer belonging. Chapter 3 covers the methodology used in this study, including recruitment protocols of the youths involved in the youth participatory action research, data collection techniques, data coding, and analysis. Chapter 4 presents the research findings, covering six overarching themes from the research. The chapter also contains the discussion section and limitations of the study. The last chapter 5 contains the study's conclusion and implications.

Definition of Key Terms

This section lists and defines key terms used throughout the thesis.

Unbelonging – the process through which society limits immigrants' and newcomers' sense of belonging through exclusion. It involves the creation of boundaries, limits a sense of belonging to places, and socially fixes people to peripheral areas and exclusion from full socio-legal participation in society. This exclusion can persist irrespective of whether individuals feel a sense of belonging to their resettled countries or have access to formal belonging to the state, such as legal immigration status or citizenship (Christensen 2009).

Refugee – according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, a refugee is “a person who is outside their country of nationality or habitual residence; has a well-founded fear of persecution because of their race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion; and is unable or unwilling to avail themselves of protection of that country, or to return there for fear of persecution” (UNHCR, 2007, p. 10).

Country of origin- in the migration context, a country of nationality or former habitual residence for a person or group who has migrated (UNHCR, 2007).

An Immigrant – is a person who moves into a country other than that of their nationality or usual residence, and the country of destination becomes their new country of usual residence (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 1998, p.10).

Newcomer – an umbrella term used to describe various categories of immigrants born outside the United States. The US Department of Educational defines the term as any recently arrived foreign-born students and their families to the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

Belonging – is a multifaceted and dynamic concept without a uniform definition. However, some common features of the construct of belonging consistent across different disciplines include fluidity, intersectionality, socially negotiated, and connections to place and material things. Belonging is manifested through the intersection of social identities and is characterized by fluidity (Anthias, 2006; Antonsich, 2010; Lahdesmaki et al., 2016; Mahar et al., 2013).

Sense of belonging- experiences of being valued and motivation to form social bonds (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Sense of belonging consists of various dimensions, including valued involvement, fit, frequency of affective interactions, and stable relationship (Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, Patusky, Bouwsema, & Collier, 1992; Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Youth/young people – for this research, refer to adolescents between 14-19 years of age.

Statement of the problem:

Research about refugee children and youth has increased but focuses more on social and emotional health, mentorship, and belonging in educational settings (Brar, 2010; Chopra et al., 2014; Howland, Anderson, Smiley, & Abbott, 2006; Rueda & Genzok, 2007). Additionally, research about refugee young people does not focus on centering their voices and how they conceptualize belonging. For many youths from forced migration backgrounds, resettlement presents significant life changes and challenges related to their environment, affiliations, community, and sense of belonging. Coupled with their experience of transitioning into adolescence, they struggle to find belonging, the meaning of home, and the development of their own identities, which honor their culture, and experiences with displacement while embracing the culture of their resettled environment (Osman, Mohamed & Warner 2020). Presently many newcomer youths are coming of age when issues surrounding immigration are increasingly more polarized. Immigrant families face more state-based persecution and public antipathy, resulting in many immigrant and refugee young people experiencing

loneliness, isolation, racism, and xenophobia, impacting their sense of belonging to their resettled spaces (Chavis & McMillian, 1986).

According to Bromley (1998), the question of "Who I am" takes special significance for adolescent newcomers, particularly refugees. The uprooting, displacement, and inherent insecurity that refugee youth experience affect their psychological and emotional development, making the process of identity formation and sense of belonging more difficult (Ager & Strang, 2008., Perkins et al., 2002). Given that many adolescents search for their place in society during this time of identity formation, newcomers and refugee youth do so within the context of the challenges they face with forcible removal, displacement, challenges of resettlement, and integration (Crowe, 2006). Integration and belonging become even more difficult for queer refugee youth within their own culture, diasporic communities, and resettled places. Many queer and LGBTQ youth who are displaced people struggle with belonging; as they try to find spaces within their diasporic communities and resettled homes to explore their sexuality and gender identity.

Feelings of unbelonging are common for many refugee youths; in addition to their communities, some refugees face alienation, isolation, and discrimination within the educational system due to their cultural practices, language capacity, and race (Anisef & Kilbride, 2003). Limited access to mental and emotional support to heal from generational and personal trauma associated with displacement within the education and resettlement systems leaves many youths feeling unheard and unsupported at school, with their families, diasporic communities, and broader society (Cardeli et al., 2020). Increased xenophobia, white supremacist narratives, and anti-Asian hate crimes and

speeches during the COVID-19 pandemic heightened by traditional media outlets and social media have increased fear among newcomer young people (Hearst et al., 2021., Montgomery & Foldspang, 2008). These racial events and incidents have created tension for young people from mix-immigration status families and multi-ethnic families as they struggle to find their place within social change movements. At the same time, they examine where they fit in with older generations of their families. With this tension comes the formulation of thoughts on belonging, which might not fit neatly into existing scholarships on belonging (Hearst et al., 2021).

Drawing from Iris Marion Young's normative ideals of a deliberative model of democracy theoretical framework focusing on the ideals of inclusion and political equity, this research examines how refugee youth in a Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) project called Making Worcester Home conceptualized belonging while engaging in social justice activism advocating for social change. Comparisons were made of the young people's emerging thoughts on belonging to existing migration literature.

Young's model of democratic processes informed the analysis of social justice activism data in this study; the model entails four ideals: reasonableness, publicity, inclusion, and political equity, which are needed to create relationships and guide deliberations in democratic societies. Decision-making using this model of democracy involves collective reasoning and deliberation (Young, 2002). Young's model is useful for multicultural societies when the focus is on political participation and activism because of its emphasis on the ideals of political equity and inclusion and exclusion in the democratic process. Youth engagement in community and public life is vital to a healthy democracy and linked to a sense of belonging. However, youth voices are often

dismissed or excluded from decision-making (Kolano & Davila, 2019). In discussions about social change, many young people from refugee backgrounds' voices are less visible. Some struggle to find their places in mass mobilized social movements as there are points of tension and conflicts with participating. The absence of refugee youth voices in social change, and decision-making spaces mirrors larger societal practices of excluding refugee voices. People from refugee backgrounds are less visible in local and national government decision-making spaces, policymaking, research organizations, education and training institutions, and mainstream media outlets compared to settled populations. Similarly, refugees are treated as objects of study in many intellectual knowledge production spaces, not knowledge producers.

Even within the context of newcomer integration, many models of integration focus only on economic self-sufficiency as an indicator of successful integration, and their sense of belonging and involvement in civic and political life is not often recognized as part of their integration (Ager and Strang, 2008). Activism is often impossible because they focus on becoming economically self-sufficient, leaving little time for other engagements. Like their other family members, young people from refugee backgrounds often focus on supporting their families' economic self-sufficiency and cannot fully engage in social justice movements. When they engage with social change, they do not often know how they fit in. Therefore, their voices are often silenced in social and political movements despite a resurgence in the last few years of youth activism on social media and through justice movements supporting immigration reforms, anti-racism, white supremacy, and anti-police violence, and state surveillance (Terriquez & Milkman, 2021). When young people from refugee backgrounds are involved in these spaces, their

unique needs and experiences are often not centered in the messaging of these social movements (Center for refugees, 2020).

Study Rationale

The rationale for this study is two-fold; I believe that refugee resettlement programs, refugee practitioners, community organizers, and educational institutions can benefit from understanding how young people from refugee backgrounds conceptualize where they fit in discussions and activities about social change. Understanding how they formulate concepts of belonging and their role in social change will help find better ways to engage them in social justice activism and make those spaces more inclusive. The second reason is that this study considers how the young people frame belonging compared to existing migration literature. The inductive approach this research takes centered on the voices of young people from refugee backgrounds as they formulated thoughts on belonging. This research documented changes to how young people conceptualized belonging, adding to the existing literature on belonging in migration and justice studies.

This research examines process data and only presents findings related to belonging as formulated by young people during the YPAR project. I used an inductive analysis approach and drew data from the students' writings, mapping exercises, and interview transcripts which they used to produce data for their YPAR projects. The participants for this study were students from two cohorts of the Making Worcester Home Project and were first-year high school students, sophomores, juniors, seniors, and three first-year college students. They were part of youth-focused programming from a refugee focus organization and a local culturally-specific non-profit organization serving

refugees from a Southeast Asian background. The research utilized an inductive text content analysis approach to center the young people's voices. It examines the extent to which the youths formulate thoughts on belonging as they developed their YPAR research projects about college readiness for immigrants, funding for afterschool sports programming, access to extracurricular school sporting activities, hate crimes, and intergenerational racism. Their projects were focused on creating social change through activism as part of participatory action research.

The research participants were a mixed-gender and race group of young people from refugee backgrounds who participated in the Urban Action Institute & Urban Studies Department of Worcester State University (WSU) in Worcester, Massachusetts, YPAR project, which took the form of a dual enrollment workshop series. The series was designed to examine what it means to belong within the city of Worcester, Massachusetts, among newcomer young people. The project asked the young people to identify social issues affecting them, and through a process of consensus, they developed a project that would address them. The project also fulfilled the requirements for a one-credit college-level course so that the youth were exposed to college-level work to encourage them that college could be an option.

The Making Worcester Home project served as a youth participatory action research and an empowerment model to guide first, second, and third-generation immigrant youth from refugee backgrounds to engage in social change in their community. The project utilized several research tools, including PhotoVoice, story-based advocacy, interviews, and the software storyboard. The aim was for the youth to interrogate the politics of belonging by analyzing and reflecting upon a group project that

advocated for a more equitable approach to address the needs of newcomers to promote belonging and integration within their community through social justice activism. Additionally, it added typically unheard voices to the public arena to shift the dominant narrative around integration by asking what it means for immigrant youth to call Worcester home. As participants and co-researchers, the young people worked to change the narrative about refugees and immigrants' contributions as knowledge creators with expertise about their own lives and not just people to be researched. As part of participating in the project, the young people and their parents gave informed consent for Worcester State University to use the data collected for research purposes.

As a co-researcher during the second cohort of the project, I had access to the data and got permission from the university to access data from the first cohort with some redacted identifying information. The data used for this research were student journals, course assignments, photographs from the PhotoVoice project, transcripts of recorded class discussions, presentations, and interviews with each other. Using an inductive coding process, I set out to see to what extent the students were formulating thoughts on belonging and social change as they worked on their research projects. My goal was to discuss their ideas on belonging with existing migration literature on belonging to see if we needed to change our views on belonging based on what the students formulated.

Research Questions

In this thesis, I draw from coded data from students' journals, transcripts of students' interviews, class discussions, final project presentations, and interview questions for their project undertaken in the Making Worcester Home YPAR project. From the processed data, using a two-step coding process I coded for belonging and

social change themes. My research answered the following questions: 1. How do youths from refugee backgrounds who participated in the Making Worcester Home Project formulate thoughts on belonging as they develop their projects? 2. What ways do the students frame their place in social change?

Potential Contributions:

This study provides a theoretical lens to examine belonging and social change through activism among youth from refugee backgrounds to understand their aspirations of belonging, integration, and participation in their new host society. Constructs of a sense of belonging and social change activism provide a glimpse into how refugee youth consider where and how they fit into decision-making spaces and within the context of everyday life. This research provides an opportunity to progress towards theorizing the concept of belonging for youth from immigrant and refugee backgrounds. It offers a newer lens into how we have conversations and programming that fosters the integration of newcomers.

Although not one of this research's main aims, engaging with data from the larger project shows how youth participatory action research can serve as a vehicle to engage youth from refugee backgrounds to claim space through social change activism and to center their voices and experiences. As they connect their experiences to address what it means to belong in Worcester and the US, they became agents of change to shift the dominant narratives about refugees (Sánchez Ares 2015).

Positionality

I am a black male who is from a forced migration background. This research and my participation in the Making Worcester Home project stem from my experiences

formulating thought on what it means to belong. Being a black immigrant gives me a particular perspective to understand the concepts of belonging, unbelonging, and integration.

Although the Making Worcester Home project is not centered on the experiences of Southeast Asian young people from refugee backgrounds, one of the partnering organizations was an ethnic-specific community-based organization that offers programs only for the Southeast Asian community. Therefore, the sample is unbalanced and has primarily young people who identify as Southeast Asian except for three who identified as Black. This could be seen by some as a limitation of the study as the sample is not representative of the city's racial demographic profile.

My positionality was unique in that I neither identified as Southeast Asian nor was admitted to the US as a refugee since my legal immigration status is an asylee, which is a particular type of refugee designation. However, unlike refugees, who do not get to choose the country where they were resettled, I had somewhat of a choice where I decided to file for asylum. As an asylum seeker, I was not provided with state-supported resettlement programs. These identities give me an outside perspective that impacts how I view belonging compared to this group. Additionally, perceived tensions among and between various newcomer groups meant that there were issues of trust I had to work through and how refugees might experience belonging differently. Despite my outsider perspective, we have commonalities around experiences of being an immigrant and finding our place where we fit into society.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter explores existing literature on a sense of belonging, focusing on belonging among refugee young people. The first section reviews various definitions of belonging that existing migration and transdisciplinary studies document. The literature review presents a conceptual framework of belonging that guides the study.

Migration literature and research have focused on constructs of immigrants' exclusion from society (Van Leeuwen & Wodak, 1999; Wright & Bloemraad, 2012; Yuval-Davis, 2006) when examining the concept of belonging. However, emerging research focuses on integration and how newcomer communities experience belonging, loosely defined belonging as a sense of identification and attachment to one's society (Antonisch, 2010; Crowley, 1999; Simonse, 2016). According to Lambert et al. (2013), a sense of belonging at the individual level creates feelings of safety and meaning while creating social capital and cohesion at the broader societal level. A common thread between these definitions is inclusion; however, neither addresses the complexities associated with newcomer belonging. Because this research focuses on how young people from refugee backgrounds formulate thoughts on belonging, I examined how existing literature conceptualized belonging. I searched through various academic databases for migration, sociology, psychology, and geography, using keywords of belonging, sense of belonging, and refugees. Attempts were made to ensure that approximately 85% of references were peer-reviewed research published within the last five years. However, articles older than five years were used because literature on refugee

youth belonging was sparse. Keyways and theoretical framing of how belonging is conceptualized is what I have presented here.

Conceptualizing a Sense of Belonging

The concept of belonging appears across the academic disciplines of sociology, psychology, and geography as a multidimensional phenomenon influenced by personal and environmental factors. Across each field, the concept is associated with attachment, identities, ties, and spatially. (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, Patusky, Bouwsema, & Collier, 1992; Probyn, 1996; Mackenzie, 2004; Madsen & van Naerssen, 2003; Yuval-Davis, 2006). According to Dodman (2004), belonging can be socially regulated and personally negotiated. Based on emerging research, belonging is often contextual and process-oriented and manifests itself differently at various levels of society. In contrast, Hagarty et al. (1996) stated that two defining features of belonging are feeling valued by society and sharing commonalities. Although the constructs differ, they describe the rationality of belonging, feelings of connectedness, social relationship, and the performativity of identity.

The concept of belonging bears particular importance for immigrants and refugees since there are expectations of integration and assimilation into their new environment and society. A sense of belonging is often an emotional connection and situationally contingent on how people see themselves within their environment. There is no standard definition of belonging; however, belonging is measured using psychometric scales of global belonging and social connectedness within some disciplines. Migration studies often measure belonging in ethnicity, nationality, identity, and cross-cultural and national

privileges (Hagerty & Patusky, 1995; Lee & Robbins, 1995; Malone, Pillo, & Osman, 2012). The problem with this approach is that it does not emphasize that belonging is socially produced, contested, and negotiated. It is affected by social positioning and intersecting identities. The lack of consensus about definitional issues with belonging among and within disciplines means the concept is often contested. Scholars such as Anthias (2008), have explored other ways belonging can be understood to address these gaps by focusing on the importance of translocation. The concept of translocation refers to the idea of location as a social space produced within context, temporal, spatial, and hierarchical relations around the intersections of social division such as class, ethnicity, and gender. This approach to belonging accounts for the increased movement of people across borders and the more fragmented lives they live (Anthias, 2008, p.6). I addressed this concept further in the latter part of this section.

A sense of belonging often indicates integration for refugees and newcomers. According to the UNHCR (2002), integration is dynamic, complex, and an ongoing process that allows refugees to adapt to life in their host society while maintaining their cultural identity. Some migration scholars defines integration as a two-way process that involves adjustments for newcomers and receiving societies, with its central tenet being social connections (Ager & Strang, 2008). Early research on the sociology of migration focused on how migrants adapted to or were socially excluded from the place they migrated. However, although integration is widely discussed, there is no single or accepted definition, model, or theory of refugee and immigrant integration in existing migration literature, and the concept continues to be widely debated (Vertovec, 2010., Castles et al., 2002). Scholars have used several frameworks to examine and theorize

belonging; those presented in this paper include belonging as boundaries, trans-locational positionality, intersectionality, social capital, and human ecological framework. These approaches to understanding belonging resulted from a shift towards a more global understanding of belonging (Waldinger, 2013). Some approaches try to address the fluidity of belonging and fix belonging as situational. Each approach is presented in more detail.

Belonging and the Politics of Belonging

From the literature, belonging is intrinsically linked to refugees and immigrants' integration into their new society, although it is not the only time that belonging shows up in migration discourse. Walker and Avant (1988) used content analysis to identify attributes of and use of the concept sense of belonging. One of the emerging definitions from their work includes the feeling of being an integral part of a system or environment. According to Hagerty et al. (1992), there are two dimensions of belonging: valued involvement, which involves feelings of being needed, valued, and accepted, and the second has to do with fit, which entails feelings of complementing the environment (pp.173). Authors such as Yuval-Davis (2006) distinguished the politics of belonging from belonging itself as a concept. She defines belonging as emotional attachment, feelings of safety, and feelings of home. She refers to the politics of belonging as boundary maintenance, which creates separation and othering into "us" and "them." She argues that the requirements of belonging are permeable and dependent on several factors and levels of belonging. These factors include identities, social location, and political

values. Anthias (2016) posits that the notion of belonging has spatial dimensions, which are about the actual spaces and places where people are accepted as members or feel they are. It is also related to social inclusion and boundary-making. Yuval-Davis (2007) focuses on the politics of belonging as practiced by the nation-state providing examples of the increased vetting of immigrants and the view of asylum seekers who are Muslims or from developing countries as a threat to national security and culture and the need to have borders and boundaries to keep them out. There we see the theme of inclusion and exclusion as a common thread running through the several ways that belonging is being conceptualized so far. Apart of the regulation of who belongs is the creation of boundaries.

Belonging as Boundaries

For Sumsion and Wong (2011), boundaries can constrain and limit belonging. For example, having legal status or naturalized citizenship is insufficient for belonging if the community does not grant such belonging. Thus, belonging has an element of reciprocity between newcomer and host community; it is relational and requires having certain interpersonal bonds with the group (Baumeister and Leary 1995). Among immigrants and people from refugee backgrounds, their perception of belonging and conceptualization of home is impacted by nostalgia and their physical environments (Marcus 2014). Youths from refugee backgrounds often feel better adjusted and function when they experience being valued in social settings and establish meaningful relationships in their resettled countries (Correa-Velez et al. 2010).

According to Caxaj and Berman (2010), refugee youths struggle to feel inclusion and connectedness in discourses of discrimination and marginality. Some of this marginalization is created based on their social identities, which the framework of boundaries of belonging does not address. Boundaries are linked to the concept of the nation-state and its role in deciding who is permitted to belong and participate in society. However, because the state classifies someone as belonging does not mean they experience belonging. The problem with this approach is that it does not consider social location and the multi-dimensions of belonging. Instead, it places individuals into categories and creates the “us and them” concept, which assumes and creates a singularity of experience and opportunities for groups of immigrants and obscures people’s lived experiences and multiple identities.

Within the discourse of boundaries of belonging, there are debates about transnational identity, which challenges a central thought of this approach to belonging and one of its shortcomings since the focus is often on the notion of national boundaries alone and not so much on social locations (Crosby, 2006). At the local level, forms of belonging cannot be disassociated from social positions which are impacted by social relations and categories of identity. Therefore, this brings me to introduce intersectionality as a framework for understanding belonging which aim to address trans locational positionality.

Intersectionality Framework

Intersectionality as a concept from gender studies was brought to bear on how identities and social locations of immigrants influence how they negotiated belonging and

unbelonging within spaces and social hierarchies. The literature shows that belonging is active and changes (May, 2011; Mee, 2009). Probyn (1996) suggests that belonging is a process of becoming and that the process of belonging is constantly in flux since social groups are continuously transforming. Particularly for refugees' experiences, scholars argue that their experiences of being in-between mean they must negotiate plural forms of belonging due to positions and identities between their countries of origin and host countries (Krzyzsnowski & Wodak 2007). According to Fruja Amthor (2017), many refugee youths have nuanced experiences based on the intersectionality and fluidity of their multiple identities.

The use of intersectionality as a framework to understand belonging represents a growing body of literature that has taken Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality and paired it with Bulter's postcolonial perspectives to speak to the fluid nature of belonging. Additionally, taking such an approach addresses the performativity and subjectivity of belonging. These approaches to belonging are rooted in a phenomenological approach centered on meaning-making (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 2019). Within the context of refugees, these approaches lead to a better understanding of how they are making meaning of their experiences. Using an intersectional framework to belong gets to the political dimension of belonging. For example, in the US context, various categories of identity can result in overlapping discrimination and individuals experiencing exclusion based on the combination of these categories (Crenshaw, 1994).

This framework adds an essential dimension to belonging by addressing a gap in previous frameworks related to social categories such as racialized groups and the

divisions within formulated groups, leading to exclusion. Despite the benefits of this approach, a drawback is that it places individuals within fixed categories and permanent groups, which undermines social processes and practices which impact social structures and categories. Membership in a group might not necessarily mean a perfect fit and belonging. For example, refugees in diasporic groups might not be accepted based on their sexual orientation or gender identity and therefore experience unbelonging even though they technically are a part of the diaspora. Therefore, it could be argued that the model does not go far enough to deconstruct belonging and cannot address situations where belonging outcomes are not produced by intersectionality. One might argue that it raises more questions about the impact of inequality on the integration approach that is often used to create refugee belonging. Trans-locational positionality has been used to address issues within the intersectionality framework.

Trans-locational positionality

Anthias (2008) employs the concept of trans-locational positionality to explore the concept of a sense of belonging and identity, which is argued to be a product of social location within an intersectional framework. She argues that belonging and identity are relationally produced and are linked to social boundaries and hierarchies. She went on to say that these can change due to social location, geography, and context. The concept of belonging is dynamic and focuses on a process of inclusion, exclusion, participation, and access. It is also tied to other societal constructs of class, gender, ethnicity, and the boundary-making process. Anthias' concept focuses on social location and processes, which means we must consider broader socio-economic and political-institutional

frameworks and structures linked to representation. Anthia's trans-locational perspective challenges the nation-based approaches by acknowledging that there are multiple social locations and belonging. Anthia's argument challenges belonging within diversity and integration discourses and practices, which is race and ethnicity focus, excluding other aspects of immigrants' social locations. Belonging, therefore, cannot be seen as being fixed to a place but can be tied to separate locations in varying ways. Therefore, we can occupy different and contradictory positions of belonging while experiencing globally belonging. A critical aspect of Anthias' work is clarifying the distinction between identity and belonging. Identity is wrapped up with who we are, while belonging involves a sense of how people feel about their location within their social world.

Using the concept of trans-locational positionality, Anthias (2002), in her research, focused on the narratives of belonging and exclusion of second-generation Greek Cypriots in the UK; her study found that many youths shared stories of exclusion related to notions of Britishness. While at the same time, they distinguished themselves from certain ethnic practices and family links that create ambiguity with their ethnic belonging. In a similar study, Al-Rebholz (2015) explores how Muslim migrant women in Germany construct and negotiate a sense of belonging using an intersectional construction of belonging and unbelonging within a transnational context due to their experience with diversity, various identities, and multiculturalism. The study concluded that a sense of belonging encompasses the research participants' various spaces, languages, and socio-cultural contexts. From the literature reviewed, a takeaway is that integration is seen through the lens of boundaries and strategies to exclude, including social identity reconstruction.

Using the conceptual framework of trans-locational positionality, scholars have resolved issues associated with the concept of multiple identities and intersectionality. The approach sees identity as a set of processes and focuses on broader social processes related to time and space. The approach, more so than the intersectional framework, amplifies potential contradictions of social locations. For example, some categories such as gender and ethnicity might experience more disadvantages due to certain practices. These categories, at times, create contradictory experiences with inclusion or exclusion. The framework helps deepen understanding of how the intersections of social relations are both reinforcing and contradictory (Anthias, 1998).

Belonging as Safety

Yuval-Davis (2006) posits belonging as being in relationship with boundary work, where belonging is linked to feelings of home and safety. It is also spatial and involves being socially included (Anthias, 2016). Bennett (2014) argues that physical spaces are spatial embodiments of belonging, which often evoke past, present, and future sense of belonging. For Black (2009), this sense of belonging is sometimes embodied, and by connecting with these spaces, they might be tied to the representation of self or relationships. These spaces and places of belonging and material objects are used to contest boundaries and identities. For example, newcomer communities often use murals, street names, and art to signify their community identity (Ottosson, 2014; Youkhanna, 2015).

Human Ecology Framework

Using a human ecology framework, Bronfenbrenner (1994) argues that contextual influences impact the development of a sense of belonging. This framework accounts for cultural factors that influence the development and helps us understand multiple socio-cultural contexts of young refugees. In migration literature, a sense of belonging among refugee youths is often examined within resettling, focusing on identity development, social capital, school experiences, and acculturation to their new environment. Such an approach relies heavily on integration as a common framework and ignores the fluidity of belonging and the trans-locational positionality of young refugees.

Literature about young refugees' belonging has focused on school experiences and belonging. Research shows that belonging influences students' engagement, academic achievement, and motivation to engage in school (Anderman, 2002; Singh, Chang & Dika, 2010; Walker & Green, 2009). Within this context, a sense of belonging is defined as; "being accepted, included, supported and respected," according to Goodenow (1993). Wallace, Ye, and Chhuon (2012) studied 89- high school students who were ethnically diverse, found connections to teachers, identification, and participation in school-sanctioned activities, and perceptions of fitting in with peers were experiences that lead to a greater sense of belonging. Their findings suggest that authentic connection with a specific teacher demonstrated that teacher's commitment to their success. On the other hand, belonging with their peers had more to do with acceptance.

Social Capital Framework

Based on the literature reviewed, belonging is achieved by having social support, a sense of community, and social capital. It can be defined as feelings of involvement,

fitness, frequent interactions, and stable relationships (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Hagerty et al., 1992). Some research uses the human ecology framework to examine belonging among young from refugee backgrounds because it encompasses socio-cultural factors that influence their resettlement. Additionally, some belonging research about refugee youth focuses on tying belonging with well-being and not so much on how the youth conceptualize belonging (Ager,1997; Ager, 2000; Ahearn and Athey, 1991, Ziaian et al., 2021). Some scholars argue that feelings of unbelonging to their host countries is a significant risk factor for the overall well-being of youths from refugee backgrounds (Baumeister & Leary, 1995., Hogarth, 2011., Tingvold et. al., 2012).

Additionally, research has found that the youth's overall functioning and health are significantly influenced by their perceptions of belonging and being included or excluded socially within their communities (Correa-Velez et al., 2010; McGregor et al., 2015; Liamputtong & Kurban, 2018). A strong sense of belonging improved the youth's educational engagement and adaptivity to their new environment (Graham et al., 2019). Based on these findings, it is important to unpack and understand how youths conceptualize belonging.

Conclusion

In summary, the literature described belonging as a process of becoming rather than a state (Antonsich, 2010). Belonging is dynamic and situational, which shifts with time. It is spatially influenced, contested, and can be plural (Krzyanowski & Wodak, 2007). Most of the literature about belonging focuses on relationships between ethnicity, nationality, and belonging; however, scholars such as Anthias (2006) challenge these

approaches as being limited. They encourage us to see belonging in ethnic and racial terms, using intersectionality and trans-locational frameworks. These frameworks argue that social identities are important dimensions of belonging that must be accounted for because race, gender, ethnicity, and social location play a significant role in feelings of inclusion and exclusion for newcomers and refugees. Migrating to a new country makes some individuals re-evaluate their identities, especially their racial identity. For refugees and newcomers from countries with homogenous racial groups, racial differentiation is a new construct that they must grapple with in their new multiracial resettled home. In Hogarth's (2011) study of Canadian immigrant women, a sixteen-year-old Somalian stated, "it was only when I came to Canada, I realized I was Black...my blackness never defined me before" (p.73). Other studies reported that refugee youth explained how they had to take on racial and ethnic identities during and after their resettlement (Bhatia, 2010; Forman, 2001).

Additionally, other forms of identity could impact feelings of unbelonging; emerging from the work of Anthias (2006), gender was identified as one such identity. She argues that gender is central to belonging and boundary formation. Yuval-Davis (2011) posits that we should consider belonging in relation to intersectional categories of social location, including race, ethnicity, class, religion, family kinship, and nation. She went on to say that belonging focuses on inclusion and exclusion, impacting people's ability to claim to belong. The process of belonging is dialectic and involves seeking and granting belonging (Yuval-Davis 2006, 2011).

This section presented several ways scholars have theorized belonging and the different frameworks used. No one approach provides a comprehensive way to examine belonging because of its nuanced nature. Each framework builds on the limitations of the others. I have attempted to show the problems associated with boundaries of belonging and presented the intersectionality and trans-locational positionality frameworks, which challenges the boundaries approach to belonging. Both argue for examining social relationships produced and influenced by differentiation structures that create inclusion and exclusion.

As a concept belonging is challenging to define because it is multifaceted, dynamic, and must be understood contextually (Anthias, 2006; Antonsich, 2010; Lahdesmaki et al., 2016). Although belonging is dynamic, certain features are consistent across different areas of study. These include intersectionality, affective personal experiences, fluidity, socially negotiated, and connection to place and materials. Our intersecting social identities mean that belonging cuts across various locations of identity (Anthias, 2006; Yuval-Davis, 2011). A common theme running through the different areas of study of belonging is that belonging is active and continually changing because identities are socially constructed are contested (May, 2011; Mee, 2009; Scheiberlhofer, 2007). The other observation I made is that scholars continue to find ways to theorize belonging because of unsettled issues with a uniform definition as well as the dynamic nature of the concept itself. There is currently no one definition that encapsulates all the dimensions of belonging. An intersectional approach shows that belonging is individualized and nuanced based on experiences (Krzyszowski and Wodak, 2007). Belonging must be understood in relation to an emotional dimension (Anthias, 2006;

Yuval-Davis, 2011). The various theorization of belonging implies that it is sought, granted, and claimed. Boundaries and limits can be placed on belonging and legal status are insufficient for newcomer communities to experience belonging (Baumeister and Leary, 1995).

Despite extensive scholarship on newcomer and refugee belonging, there are still significant gaps in research on understanding how refugee young people experience and think about belonging. The literature does not speak extensively about the performative nature of belonging, a potential area requiring further research. I used a narrative perspective for this study to uplift the participants' voices. Since belonging does not have a prescribed structure of what it should be and emergences based on how it is socially constructed, it is crucial to center narratives of youth from refugee backgrounds to show how they conceptualize and negotiate a sense of belonging. Lacking in the existing literature on belonging is the centering of narratives and the voices of people from refugee backgrounds in theorizing belonging based on their lived experiences. I believe an increased understanding of how youth from refugee backgrounds experience belonging is important in helping to formulate new ways of theorizing belonging and address gaps in the theory.

This literature review evaluated relevant existing research surrounding how belonging is conceptualized. Belonging is seen as a process of becoming; it has a spatial and contextual dimension and shifts over time. It is contested but can be plural. Others see belonging in intersectional social location categories, including race, ethnicity, class, religion, family kinship, and nation. Another perspective suggests belonging is a

boundary setting, inclusion, and exclusion, making it dialectic and involving seeking and granting belonging.

Since the current study forms part of a larger YPAR in which one of the goals was social change through activism, it is crucial to explore literature that addresses social justice activism among people from refugee backgrounds and the role immigrants and young people from refugee backgrounds play in solidarity movements. Literature that focuses primarily on refugee activism is sparse, despite youth activism as a social phenomenon and area of scholarly inquiry getting more attention. Existing research focus on identity, agency, and youth marginality in society (Ginwright, 2015; Krishner, 2015). Some studies apply the concept of critical social capital within community settings, teaching, and learning environments (Ginwright, 2007). The literature argues that youth can develop activist identities by participating in activities promoting political consciousness and community engagement. Social capital is a theoretical construct defined as a person's connections to other individuals or networks that helps them to achieve goals (Stanton-Salazar, 1997). This theoretical construct is widely used in research on access to higher education, school outcomes for youth, and cultural and linguistic belonging (Gandara & Contreras, 2009). Ginwright (2007) coined critical social capital as an extension of the construct, which he describes as collective interest networks, collective identities, mutual trust, and the common good. The approach focuses on change and harnessing racialized identities to support collective action.

For many young people from refugee backgrounds, afterschool programming, especially those offered through community organizations, is essential for developing self

and social awareness (Harris & Kiyama, 2013). According to Fine et al. (2000), these physical and conceptual spaces allow young people to imagine what can be. Studies of Asian American youth political development and activism have shown that community organizations have served as spaces that support this activism (Kiang, 2001; Kwon, 2013). Quinn and Nguyen's (2017), in a study of Vietnamese youth in Philadelphia, found that afterschool programming helps develop the youths as civic actors. While these studies highlight the development of youth refugee activism, there remain gaps in the research within the US on refugee activism and solidarity with mass movements for racial justice, equity, environmental rights, and inclusion. Although some studies about youth political activism take an intersectional framework, their focus is on solidarity across racial boundaries and not with an immigrant lens.

Few theoretical frames and perspectives are better suited to understand refugee youth belonging because they center the youth's voices. Research approaches such as digital storytelling, qualitative phenomenological study method, and grounded theory are the most prominent approaches frequently used in previous research. Consistent with research within the critical paradigm, researchers doing belonging work assumed that structural injustice shapes quotidian experiences and feelings of belonging. The intersectional and postcolonial perspectives have been used in studies on the belonging of refugee youth of color, drawing on the works of Kimberle Crenshaw (1989) and Patricia Hill Collins (2019) to understand how racism and other forms of oppression are experienced. These researchers focus on belonging as boundaries and involve positionality, oppression, and privilege. They examine the relationship between socio-

environmental factors, gender, economic status, and race to understand feelings of inclusion and exclusion.

In the next chapter, I outline the methods used to gather data on how the youths conceptualize belonging.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

In this section, my thesis's methodological and ethical concerns are discussed. This exploratory study employed qualitative methods to explore how young people from a refugee background formulated thoughts on the concepts of belonging and social justice activism as they framed the need for social change as part of a youth participatory action project titled Making Worcester Home, which was facilitated through a one-credit college-level course. This study draws upon a narrative perspective premised on a social constructivist model; this model was selected because of the understanding that belonging is constructed, negotiated, dynamic, and has multiple possibilities because of its nature. This study gathered data from students' class journal entries, student interviews amongst themselves, class discussions, interview questions for their YPAR projects, and final project presentations. Inductive content analysis was used as the approach to code course and classwork, and emerging themes were recorded. From meta-codes, secondary coding was undertaken to look at how they formulated concepts of belonging, inclusion, and exclusion in discussions about social change to better understand how they thought about belonging.

As part of the discussion of findings for this research, existing literature addressing a sense of belonging in migration literature was discussed with how the young people from refugee backgrounds formulate their thoughts on belonging. The purpose was to center the role of narratives as a framework for understanding belonging by exploring the many ways belonging shows up in this youth participatory action research project as they develop research ideas about college-readiness, afterschool programming, and social

change. The literature also provided scholarship to address themes related to my research questions. The following questions guided the research:

1. How do youths from refugee backgrounds who participated in the Making Worcester Home project formulate thoughts on belonging as they develop their projects?
2. What are some ways that the students frame their place in social change?

Methodological framework

Narrative Perspective. This research drew on the narrative perspective, which posits that objective truth does not exist; our reality is perceived as socially constructed and negotiated. The perspective is rooted in the post-structural social constructivist model (Epston & White, 1990; Hansen, 2015; Dickerson, 2014). Some research on belonging takes the epistemological perspective that a sense of belonging does not have specific deterministic structures that prescribe how it is; instead, multiple possibilities are socially constructed. Moen (2006), reflecting on a narrative research approach, places it within the framework of the socio-cultural theory. The approach requires researchers to examine human actions in relation to their social context and how they make meaning of those experiences through stories or narratives. Narrative research is emerging with studies in educational settings on educational practices. It is often considered a new branch of interpretive research; it is seen as both a phenomenon and a method (Connely & Clandinin, 1990; Gudmundsdottir, 2001).

A narrative approach is often used within studies that focus on the experiences of youths from a refugee background. According to Schiff (2012), narratives encompass

declarative, temporal, social, and spatial aspects. Ricoeur et al. (1984) argue that narratives have a temporal dimension because they can occur over a timeline and because people construct accounts of their lives using chronology. The spatial dimension stems from storytelling taking place within a defined space. Because narratives exist in social spaces, meaning is derived through how positionality is negotiated (Kraus, 2013, McAdams, 200; Schiff, 2012; Connelly and Clandinin, 2006). A narrative approach provides a platform and framework for young people from refugee backgrounds to share accounts of their experiences and offers them an opportunity to engage with the self to interrogate and negotiate a sense of belonging. Since most research that addresses the well-being of young people from refugee backgrounds privileges the opinion of experts over the voices of the young people and uses expert-driven approaches (Edge et al., 2014; McCarty and Marks, 2010); these approaches deny the youth the opportunity to be active participants in determining decision that shapes their lives. The exclusion of their voices negatively impacts belonging and social integration (Esses et al., 2017).

Understanding experiences with belonging for young people from refugee backgrounds is a complex process because the concept of belonging, as I argued earlier, is dynamic, ambiguous, and multi-layered. Combined with their developmental stage, it becomes even more complicated as they navigate their intersecting identities and positionality within their social world. With such nuances, it is essential to understand how they formulate concepts of belonging to support their wellbeing. There is little research examining narratives of belonging of young people from refugee backgrounds. The only studies I found contextualized belonging through sports (Spaaij, 2015), educational settings (Kia-Keating and Ellis, 2007), and others focused on belonging as

part of a more extensive study on the general well-being of refugees (Edge et al., 2013; McGregor et al., 2015; Patnaik and Mulholland, 2014; Valentine et al., 2009). Two other studies examined the construct of belonging for refugee youth (Caxaj and Berman, 2010; Mbabaali et al., 2013). What is missing from these studies is the focus on how the youths construct belonging for themselves. The current study aimed to fill that gap using a novel approach by analyzing narratives in which young people from refugee backgrounds formulate their thoughts on belonging while putting them in conversation with existing migration literature on belonging.

Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR). Although my study is not YPAR, the data was drawn from the Making Worcester Home YPAR project. Youth-Led Participatory Action Research is an innovative approach to youth and community development based on social justice principles, where young people work collaboratively with adults and are trained to conduct systematic research to improve their lives and their communities (Ozer & Schotland, 2011). Data collected in the YPAR process is used to advocate for change. YPAR as a research paradigm employs youth voices as experts in helping to create change by transforming the youth into agents of social change through education, research, and advocacy. It is based on the same principles as Participatory Action Research (PAR) but requires that the youth take a leading role in the research projects; this is a departure from traditional roles and power relationships in other research approaches (Powers and Tiffany, 2006).

YPAR framework is epistemologically centered on collective action where academics and participants utilize democratic ideals to engage in research design,

methods, and analyses (Torre, 2009). PAR is often a better option when researching systematically excluded, oppressed populations, and denied acknowledgment that they possess expertise about their own experiences (Cammartota & Fine, 2008). PAR creates culturally relevant knowledge and connects to people's lived experiences used to create actions (Jacquez et al., 2012). The framework is anchored in Freire's critical praxis and pedagogy, examining positionality and power. Using YPAR, the young people took the lead in the research, which helped them interrogate their positionality within society and dominant structures. The approach helped them be co-researchers doing things for themselves instead of having things done on their behalf, given that they are excluded from decision-making (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). According to Tuck & Guishard (2013), PAR helps us understand social theories and problems better while addressing inequality and oppression of marginalized and minoritized groups of young people.

Steps in YPAR Process

Power in this approach is shared, and the adult role in the process is to ensure the youth are getting the proper training and skills (Powers and Tiffany, 2006). The process involves nine steps; however, it is an iterative process:

1. Recruiting the YPAR team
2. Building relationships
3. Developing critical awareness
4. Identify issues
5. Creating the research design
6. Conducting the research

7. Analyzing the data
8. Advocating for change
9. Reflecting and repeating the process.

Method

This research focuses on thoughts of belonging, but it is just an aspect of a more extensive youth participatory action research project, Making Worcester Home, which addressed college readiness among young people from refugee backgrounds in Worcester, Massachusetts. The second area of focus project was claiming space in Worcester for youth from newcomer backgrounds by engaging with them as social change agents who actively make meaning of the social world around them (Guerrero and Tinkler 2010). As newcomer adolescents try to figure out where they fit across many lines of difference in American society, there has been limited space to center their backgrounds and experiences in defining what it means to belong.

MWH YPAR Project. Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR), grounded in critical pedagogy, was selected for the Making Worcester Home Project because it allows young people to research problems that affect them in school and their communities while having a say in how they want to address them. Since part of the project's aims was focused on college readiness and social change, the approach provided them with critical thinking skills and tools to advocate for themselves. Embarking on a participatory action research (PAR) project with a group of high-school-aged youth and the community organizations that support them with afterschool programming, the project build collaboration and partnership between youth to discover a particular set of issues that

affects them, which became the focus of their YPAR projects to engage in social change. The final focus of the YPAR was to put the technical tools of story-based advocacy into the hands of newcomer youth to add typically unheard voices to the public arena and shift the dominant narrative about immigrant experiences (Sánchez Ares 2015).

The specific tools that were taught in this series of workshops included PhotoVoice, storytelling, mapping, and advocacy. The workshops offered college-level communication and analytical skills to participating youth, pushing them to engage in critical thinking that connects their own experiences to the broader world around them and to see themselves as agents of change. Through storytelling, journaling, PhotoVoice, interviews, class presentation, and story mapping exercises data for the project was collected. The current study drew upon the narratives and final project produced by the youth participants as data analyzed to see how they formulate thoughts on belonging and their role in social change.

Digital storytelling, PhotoVoice, and story mapping were used during the YPAR because several scholarships posit that digital storytelling methodologies are ideal for participatory research with minoritized groups. This collaborative research approach prioritizes self-representation and positions participants as experts on their own experiences, which is essential when working with people from refugee and immigrant backgrounds (de Jager et al., 2017). In unit 1 of the course, the students were asked to reflect upon their experiences growing up in Worcester and their social identity in the city through storytelling and a mapping exercise. They started the map creation during class and completed it outside the classroom. They met in small groups to discuss their stories

and share their map of Worcester, showing important places which held significance to who they are. Their mapping exercise and stories resulted in the students drawing places in the city that held significance to them.

Participant Selection

The data used for this research was drawn from the Making Worcester Home project, an ongoing youth participatory action research. The youths for the Making Worcester Home project were recruited using a convenience sampling technique of youth groups from Worcester Refugee Assistance Project (WRAP) in 2019 and the Southeast Asian Coalition (SEACMA) in 2020 to work with the Urban Action Institute & Urban Studies Department of Worcester State University in Worcester, Massachusetts.

Worcester Refugee Project

The Worcester Refugee Assistance Project youth group fosters community bonding among refugee children and youth and is a means to create social networks. The group caters to youth aged 12-19 years. The group focuses on sporting activities, mentorship, and educational support. Their mentorship program and guidance counseling services the program encourage and support youth to explore opportunities in higher education.

The Southeast Asian Coalition Youth Effect Program

The Youth Effect program's mission is to keep young people in schools, off the streets of Worcester, and away from gang activities and falls within the city's youth violence prevention programming through the Youth Connect Coalition. Youth Effect provides academic tutoring, community engagement opportunities, college preparation,

and physical fitness activities. The students are also part of the WYND Lion Dance program. SEACMA is an ethnic focused community-based organization that supports Southeast Asian immigrants, refugees, and long-term settled residents. They provide programs to meet clients' basic needs, overcome language and cultural barriers, integration, become self-sufficient, and participate in economic, social, and civic life in the Central Massachusetts region.

Recruitment for Making Worcester Home Project

The recruitment strategy consisted of contacting community youth leaders at both organizations via e-mail to schedule initial meetings to discuss the project. A recruitment package consisting of a flyer and letter describing the project was given to the community leaders to distribute to eligible young (high school sophomores and juniors) people in their program. Interested participants completed an application form and sent it to the Urban Action Institute, which was used to register the students for the course.

Sample

The group comprised refugees and first, second, and third-generation immigrants whose families were from refugee backgrounds. Many of the young people lived in mixed-immigration status families. The Making Worcester Home project targeted sophomores and juniors in high school who are part of WRAP Youth Group and SEAC's Youth Effect Program; however, high school 1st year students, seniors, and 1st-year college students were allowed to join the project when we did not get our quota of 15 students per each cohort. The YPAR had two successful cohorts, one in the Spring semester of 2019 consisting of nine young people and the other in the Fall semester of

2020 compromising ten young people. The same technique of seeking volunteer students was used with the WRAP program and the Youth Effect Program to get members for each cohort. There were no other criteria for selection for the project since all the young people were either refugees or from refugee backgrounds because of WRAP and SEACMA's refugee and immigrant focus.

The WRAP and SEAC youth were involved in the MWH project as both participants and co-researchers, meaning they had ownership over the project and were involved in choosing the topics they wanted to advocate for and the strategies they thought was most impactful in the city and their community. The two-hour workshop series were co-facilitated between a Worcester State University professor and the partnering organizations' program staff. The project-built knowledge, confidence, research skills, and a sense of leadership among high school-aged youth. During the program, the youth developed specific projects that spoke to a problem they were facing in the city and used storytelling/oral history, photography, and mapping to describe the problem and find a solution. During the Spring 2019 cohort, Worcester State University students in the UR421 "Immigration and American Cities" course worked with the participating youth to develop their stories and plan for an exhibition and advocacy actions. In the Fall 2020 cohort, the students only worked with the co-facilitators to develop their advocacy actions. I co-facilitated the Fall 2020 cohort, which was held via zoom video conferencing on Thursday afternoons during the semester due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. I was also involved as a guest presenter in the Spring 2019 cohort. The workshops were held in person at Worcester State University on Saturday afternoons during the semester.

The students who participated in the YPAR did so voluntarily with the written permission of their parents. The project was subjected to the IRB process of Worcester State University and got approval before it was undertaken. When new co-facilitators were added, we had to complete IRB training, and an application was made to add us to the project. Both cohorts of students were required to complete an application form for the course, which allowed them to get a Worcester State University student identification number and access to online student systems. They were not paid to participate in the project; however, they agreed to complete college-level credit coursework by participating. The Urban Action Institute covered their registration fees as university students from grant funding from the Greater Worcester Community Foundation for the project. All nine students in 2019 and 10 students in 2020 who started the program completed. The 2019 cohort received meals and refreshments during each session provided by the Urban Action Institute. Students were informed of the availability of funding to pay them a modest stipend if a few wanted to continue working on the project after the course ended. Unfortunately, although there was initial interest, none continued with the project. Each participant agreed to complete 42 credit hours, equivalent to a one-credit college course; earned through in-class time, a collaborative project, and class readings and writing. The informed consent gave permission for work produced together could be used by the Urban Studies department for further research.

Data Generation

Data analyzed for this study was generated from the transcriptions of class discussion recordings, final presentations, and students' interview recordings for their

YPAR projects. The data collected by the students for their YPAR PhotoVoice projects were analyzed using the SHOWeD method to interpret and see how their experiences were represented. They went through their PhotoVoice project as a whole group activity that incorporated the initial reflection of the person who took the photo and the overall group. They create a compilation of their images and recording, analyzing for emerging patterns and common themes. They articulated what they saw as important and wanted to convey through collaboration. The images they selected, and their narratives reflected how they perceived, experienced, and made sense of their environment. Once they interpreted the data, they discussed what type of public-facing activity they would undertake to present their findings and advocate for change. This approach ensured that the ultimate decision-making rested with the youth, a critical part of participatory action research. These sessions were audio-recorded, which generated the transcript this study used in addition to the photographs. Pilot interviews were transcribed, and the students discussed in groups the themes that emerged with the guidance of the co-facilitators. Imagines from the mapping exercise were discussed as a group and incorporated into their final proposals. These discussions were recorded, and I accessed these transcripts as part of my data collection.

The PhotoVoice photographs, students' journals, and reflections made up the complete data set that I compiled and analyzed into themes. All recordings were transcribed using an online professional transcription software. The manuscripts produced were then checked for correctness and edited as needed using the original recordings. Once the transcription was completed, the manuscripts and the students' other written materials were uploaded to Dedoose qualitative software for coding.

Data Collection

This research reported only on one aspect of a more extensive study and was only concerned with how the young people were forming thoughts on belonging. This study draws upon the narratives of the youth participants. By collecting data from the youth, I obtained detailed narratives that provided a deeper understanding of the context of their experiences. My data collection and those the students used in their YPAR projects are presented here to paint a more fulsome picture of my process. During the Making Worcester Home workshop sessions, participants were divided into focus groups and engaged in discussions facilitated by them with the guidance of one of the lead researchers on the project. These groups were based on the research topics that the students selected to be their area of interest. Each cohort had two focus groups based on the research topics chosen. Participants were asked what it means to belong in Worcester in context to how they see themselves and how others see them. They were also asked to draw a map of their community highlighting areas of significance to them. They were invited to share these thoughts and maps in their focus groups and with the wider class. Following these exercises, they engaged in brainstorming individually and collectively issues in their community that they wanted to work on changing. Through collective agreement, they decided on the topics of their focus. The focus groups and large group discussions were audio-recorded. The focus groups adhered to the collaborative spirit of YPAR and followed the steps outlined early in my literature review.

YPAR Project. This section addresses data collection in the YPAR project and how I accessed the existing data for this research. When engaging in PAR, there is no

right or wrong way, and the project reflects the group's context and capacity. The MWH project involved many steps and was an iterative process. The students identified several challenges and had collective action through discussion to select the issue they wanted to research. The students were separated into two groups based on the two topics they decided to research. For the 2019 cohort, they examine college readiness for immigrants and funding for after-school sports programs. In the 2020 cohort, the topics were hate crimes, integrational racism, and funding for after-school sports programs. They gathered preliminary data to learn about the issue within the local and national contexts. They then developed research questions and identified the tools needed to answer their research questions. Once they identified the research tools needed, they engage in data collection, collective analysis of the data, and drew conclusions based on the findings. The process was not linear, and the research team moved back and forth between steps.

For the MWH project, the students collected data through a series of classroom activities and assignments, including PhotoVoice, storytelling, mapping, audio recordings of interviews with each other, and a survey instrument they used to collect data from their friends and family members. For the PhotoVoice, interviews, and mapping exercise, the students came together in their groups to share their findings and initiate critical dialogue based on the topic they were researching. The students completed journals by responding to prompts to reflect on their experiences after each class and assignment. For the PhotoVoice, priority was given to the interpretation of the photographs, which aligns with arguments presented in Wang & Burris (1997). While centered on their research topics, the images, stories, and interviews also covered aspects of belonging.

The SHOWeD technique developed by Wang and Burris (1999) was used to help the participants develop their research topics and make sense of the data they collected for the PhotoVoice. The SHOWeD technique is used in PhotoVoice projects to interpret the images collected. The technique consists of 6 questions that lead the participants through the discussed images. The questions are in the form of an acronym and are used to get more information about the photographs in a PhotoVoice project. The specific questions are:

- S-What do you see here?
- H-What is really happening here?
- O-How does this relate to our lives?
- W-Why does this situation, concern, or strength exist?
- E- How could this image educate people?
- D-What can we do about it?

The SHOWeD technique was used for both the PhotoVoice and during the group discussion after the students were asked to collect local and national media articles that addressed their project topics. This method was used to promote community engagement and action; by engaging in this process as a group, the youth were invited to be agents of change whose voices mattered.

The Spring 2019 cohort YPAR focused on access to afterschool sports activities and college readiness, while the Fall 2020 cohort focused on providing and accessing extracurricular sporting activities in school and intergenerational racism. It must be noted that both cohorts conducted the research and formulated a plan of action but, due to

limitations, opted not to continue with the MWH project and the implementation phase of their plans.

I wrote to Worcester State University seeking permission to use the data collected for the YPAR. Once approval was given and I had access to the data, I used computer software to transcribe audio recordings and check them for accuracy. I accessed and pulled students' assignments, presentations, and journals from google classroom and drive into one folder for analysis.

Instruments

The study's data draws upon the young people's narratives through journal reflections, group discussion summaries, PhotoVoice projects, mapping exercises, survey instruments, YPAR project presentations, and recorded interviews. These methodologies allowed the students to capture aspects of their everyday lives and then narrate stories reflecting their interpretations of events and experiences. Participants were encouraged to assume the role of experts in their situations and draw on their personal histories and experiences while telling their stories. I also kept a research journal and discussed emergent themes and preliminary findings with my co-researcher, Dr Adam Saltsman the Professor from WSU who started the project. The research journal helped me process discussions with my co-researcher around emerging themes; our discussions were conducted via zoom video conferencing. The participants' names were removed from their written work to maintain anonymity throughout this thesis; however, they used their real names during the larger project. The students wrote reflections and conducted

interviews and PhotoVoice projects outside the workshops, which were used to teach them research tools and discuss their projects.

Data Coding and Analysis

Since the study was informed by the principles of thematic narrative analysis after transcribing the data, I organized them by looking for common patterns, ideas, and emerging themes about belonging. Narratives for this study were constructed via facilitated focus group discussion and writing exercises as part of the YPAR process.

Data coding for this research took place within the context of coding data from the YPAR project in conjunction with my co-researcher Dr. Adam Saltsman the lead researcher on the Making Worcester Home project for publication purposes. Six pieces of writing were selected to develop meta-code. Dr. Saltsman and I coded the materials separately and then met afterward to compare and discuss our codes. We compared the codes developed to ensure that we had inter-rater reliability. From our code, we developed meta codes that were used to code the remainder of the data.

Once we developed meta codes and sub-codes, I pulled the transcripts containing the belonging sub-code for further coding. Thematic analysis, according to Braun and Clarke (2006), was carried out using the 6 phases, which include 1) familiarizing myself with the data through multiple readings to develop preliminary ideas and thoughts; 2) creating meaning units and coding the data based on them; 3) clustering codes into potential groups and developing possible themes; 4) determine if the themes are meaningful within the context of the data set and the code units; 5) generate descriptions and definitions for themes; 6) reporting analysis findings. An inductive approach was

adopted to identify themes. The coding process and analysis were iterative to ensure it was thorough when I established themes, outliers, and other interesting data points to conclude findings. Connecting patterns uncovered themes in the participants' words from their interviews, PhotoVoice, and writing exercises while ensuring their voices were centered.

The next chapter presents the research findings, organized around central themes from the data about how the students conceptualized a sense of belonging.

CHAPTER 4

RESEARCH FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

In this chapter, I explore and report the findings of my study. As noted previously, these findings are only a part of the overall findings from the YPAR research, as my focus was on how the young people formulated thoughts on belonging as they engaged in their action research. My findings are sectioned correlating to significant themes found in the study. To protect the anonymity of the students, their names were removed and replaced with their student registration numbers before the data was made available to me. Because some demographic information was unavailable for the 2019 cohort, identifying information was drawn from the students' narratives through journal reflections, group discussion summaries, PhotoVoice projects, mapping exercises, survey instruments, and recorded interviews. Eight-six (86) documents produced by the students were analyzed. Although I did not use a pseudonym or the students' ID numbers, their original words are presented to ensure trustworthiness. The students' genders and grade levels were used to identify them.

Participants' Demography

Nineteen young people from refugee backgrounds participated in this study. They were students who completed the Making Worcester Home project and were selected using convenience sampling. Consistent demographic information was not collected across the two cohorts because the enrollment process and the information collected differed for the two cohorts. Therefore, there are gaps in the demographic data. My sample consisted of first-year high school students to first-year college students broken into two cohorts, 2019 and 2020. For the 2019 cohort, 45% of the participants identified

as females and 56% as males. The majority identified as Southeast Asian (67%), while 33% identified as Black Africans. 56% were high school juniors, 22 % were first-year college students, and 11% were high school seniors and sophomores. In the 2020 cohort, there was an even ratio of males to females, each 50%, and all ten participants in the 2020 group identified as Southeast Asian.

For this group, the majority (70%) of the students identified as US-born citizens, one as a refugee, and one as a permanent resident. 40% of the students were high school seniors, 30% were juniors, 20% were sophomores, and 10% were first-year high school students. All participants in this study were from a refugee background and spoke English. Being from a refugee background meant one or more parents or grandparents came to the US as refugees. An overview of the participants' demographics is provided in table 1 below. While the study explores how young people from refugee backgrounds formulate thoughts on belonging, their demographic information provides context and deepens the analysis of the main findings. Missing demographic data is one of the significant limitations of this study.

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of participants										
2019					2020					
Participants (N=19)	Gender				Gender					
	Male	Female	Race	Immigration Status	Education Level	Male	Female	Race/Ethnicity	Immigration Status	Education Level
	5 (55.5%)	4 (44.4%)	Black/African-3 (33.33%) Southeast Asian-6 (66.67%)	Refugee – 3(33.33%) US Citizen - 1(11.11%) Unknown – 5 (55.56%)	First-year student – 0 Sophomore - 1(11.11%) Junior – 5 (55.56%) Senior – 1(11.11%) College Freshman – 2 (22.22%)	5 (50%)	5 (50%)	Southeast Asian – 10 (100%)	Refugee – 1 (10%) US Citizen - 7 (70%) Permanent Resident -1 (10%) Unknown – 1 (10%)	First-year student – 1 (10%) Sophomore -2 (20%) Junior – 3 (30%) Senior – 4 (40%) College Freshman - 0

Emerging Themes

Through a collaborative approach, the Making Worcester Home YPAR had identified college readiness, school funding to purchase gears for afterschool sports

programs, diversity in sporting activities offering and extracurricular activities, hate crimes, and intergenerational racism as their focus areas. The students' meetings notes, journal reflections, and recorded conversations for their YPAR projects were analyzed, and the following meta-code emerged from the student writing and dialogues; interpersonal inequality/discrimination, systemic inequality, an emergent sense of self, an emergent sense of social problems, empathy, framing change, and a sense of place. From these meta-codes, themes explicitly related to belonging were distilled. These meta-codes, themes, and sub-themes related to belonging are detailed in Table 2. The participants' formulation of belonging was described through six main themes: 1) spatial belonging – relationship to place, 2) intersectionality and social location, 3) boundaries - inclusion and exclusion, 4) dual identities, 5) feeling supported and well resourced, and 6) belonging through activism and community change. The emerging themes were broken down into sub-themes and explored in detail.

Table 2: Meta-Codes and Emerging Themes Related to Belonging			
Meta-Codes - YPAR	Sub-theme	Belonging Related Themes	Sub-themes Related to Belonging
Interpersonal inequality/discrimination			
Systemic inequality			
Framing change	Role of social media in mass mobilization	Belonging through activism and community change	Social Media influencers as activism
An emergent sense of social problems			
Empathy			
Sense of place	Awareness of personal geography	Spatial belonging-relationship to place	Relationship to geographical space
An emergent sense of self	Belonging	Spatial belonging-relationship to place	Geographical space Virtual space Feelings of Safety Feelings of home Inclusion/exclusion Boundaries Privilege
		Intersectionality and social location	Discrimination and privilege Generational differences Trans-locational positionality – social boundaries and social hierarchies
		Boundaries - inclusion and exclusion	Social inclusion and exclusion Othering Boundary-making
		Dual identities	Pressure to fit into multicultural cities Integration Policing culture
		Feeling supported and well resourced	Access to resources Economic self-sufficiency

Similar themes around belonging emerged between the two cohorts. However, there were differences in how each group conceptualized the emerging themes and sub-themes.

Events within the social and political context impacted the 2020 cohort. These events I

reference are the COVID-19 pandemic, anti-Asian hate due to COVID-19, and mass protest resulting from the killing of George Floyd and other unarmed Black men by the police. Some difference in the ways that belonging was conceptualized was the focus on virtual spaces as part of spatial belonging by the 2020 cohort. These spaces supported video gaming communities and became necessary during the COVID-19 lockdowns. Additionally, safety issues and inter-generational differences impacted by social location and positionality were identified by the 2020 cohort and not the 2019 cohort. Emerging themes for the 2019 cohort are presented in table 3, while those for the 2020 cohort are in table 4 below.

Table 3: Emerging Themes Related to Belonging 2019 Cohort			
YPAR Project Topic: Funding for After School Sports programming and College Readiness for Immigrants			
Codes	Themes Related to Belonging	Sub-themes Related to Belonging	Data Source
Awareness of personal geography	Spatial belonging	Relationship to geographical space	Mapping PhotoVoice
Emergent sense of self	Spatial belonging	Inclusion/exclusion – educational settings Boundaries – access to school resources/programs	Class discussions Interview transcripts PhotoVoice
	Intersectionality and social location	Discrimination - racism Privilege Trans-locational positionality Social boundaries Social hierarchies	Class discussions Interview transcript
	Boundaries - inclusion and exclusion	Social inclusion and exclusion Othering Boundary making- income inequality	Class discussion Group discussion 1:1interview transcripts PhotoVoice
	Dual identities	Pressure to fit into multicultural cities – performative nature of belonging Integration vs. assimilation Policing culture	Group discussions transcripts
	Feeling supported and well resourced	Access to resources – college readiness and funding for after-school sports programs Economic self-sufficiency	YPAR project Interview questions Groups discussions

Table 4: Emerging Themes Related to Belonging 2020 Cohort			
YPAR project Topics: Access to Extracurricular School Sporting Activities and Hate Crimes and Intergenerational Racism			
Codes	Themes Related to Belonging	Sub-themes Related to Belonging	Data Source
Framing change	Belonging through social media activism for community change	Social media influencers as activists	Journals YPAR project presentations Class discussions.
Awareness of personal geography	Spatial belonging	Relationship to geographical space	Mapping
Emergent sense of self	Spatial belonging	Geographical space Virtual space – gaming and COVID-19 Feelings of Safety – physical and emotional Feelings of home Inclusion/exclusion Boundaries Privilege	Mapping Class discussion transcripts YPAR project presentations YPAR interview questions.
	Intersectionality and social location	Discrimination and privilege Generational differences Trans-locational positionality – social boundaries and social hierarchies	Class discussions YPAR project group discussions transcripts Journals
	Boundaries - inclusion and exclusion	Social inclusion and exclusion – COVID-19 disparities Othering – Anti-Asian attacks Boundary-making	Group discussion YPAR project presentation Journals Class discussions transcripts
	Dual identities	Integration vs. assimilation Policing culture Ethnic Capital	Journals Class discussions transcripts
	Feeling supported and well resourced	Funding for after-school sports programs	YPAR project presentations Group discussion

Spatial Belonging – Relationship to Place

One dimension of belonging that emerged from the young people's discussions was the attachment to places and spaces within the city. Spatial belonging for the young people was linked to the emotional and institutional attachments they formed to the city of Worcester and specific places within the city. The young people connected belonging to institutions and structures which affect their everyday lives, such as school and after-school activities. These spaces not only expanded their worlds but also constrained their sense of belonging because they sometimes had to negotiate their belonging within these spaces based on their intersectional positions. These negotiations taught them about injustices and othering when they did not fit in. Some of the youth spoke of being made to constantly feel like immigrants and foreigners making it difficult for them to feel like they belong; these raised issues of safety, the impact of urban planning on their sense of community, and how they were formulating thoughts on the concept of Worcester as their home. These I categorized as sub-themes that fall under belonging; other sub-themes included the youth peoples' connection to place, privileges experienced, feelings of inclusion, exclusion, and a sense of home, as well as institutional boundaries that prevent access and impact their sense of belonging. These sub-themes are discussed in detail below.

Safety. Spatial belonging was tied to feelings of safety (emotional/physical/cultural), inclusion/exclusion, access to resources, and relationships with others. In a discussion about what Worcester meant to them, the students tied belonging to a sense of identity within the spatial context of the city. Their discussions and PhotoVoice projects showed

how they negotiated multiplicity of belonging and what it meant to be Asian and Black within a city of immigrants, where they are not the majority ethnic group of minoritized people.

Urban Geography and Planning. Within their stories, the students spoke of how urban geography and planning impacted their sense of belonging and community because of segregated neighborhoods where most of their neighbors and friends are Asians and other immigrants. They also expressed thoughts on the urban renewal of downtown Worcester; most felt left out and unbelonging to that part of the city. In contrast, others believe that urban renewal is an opportunity to feel included in the socio-economic and socio-cultural transformation of the city. During the discussion of the mapping exercise, one student shared how urban segregation impacted their knowledge of Worcester; they stated:

The mapping did expand my knowledge of Worcester. Since I live in the inner city, I have no knowledge of the suburban lifestyle of Worcester. When my classmates discussed their experiences around the city, there were multiple areas in which I did not recognize, but the way that my classmates described it, it seemed very happy and joyful. I think that it's great that everyone had good memories, as I believe that Worcester as a majority is an endearing place for most to live.

Concept of Home. Other students shared that their connections to the city were place-based, and that the urban renewal was exciting as they hope to have a place in the new

development as young professionals, which is the target group for much of the new housing stock being built. One student had this to say about their photovoice pictures:

My pictures are centered around the library and union station (go there a lot, middle of Worcester) places I hope to work in the future.

Reflecting on how the young people thought about belonging, a review of their writing shows that they connected belonging with a sense of identity as Asian-Americans and immigrants. Being "in place" to ensure attachment and security emerged as dimensions of identity and belonging. A female high school sophomore from the 2020 cohort who expressed place-based attachment to the city wrote the following in her journal reflection:

Worcester means a lot to me because I've spent my whole childhood here and this was the first place I came to when I immigrated from Thailand. So, it's very important to me, I came here when I was three years old. I realized that I have been to a lot of places that I couldn't add into the map, and I also realized that me and my classmates have also been to the same places, so it's pretty interesting.

Others express how the city is connected to their concept of home because they had feelings of belonging to their resettled spaces. They also expressed ways in which the city shaped their identity. The following quotes expressed some of their feelings about being at home:

Worcester, for me, is a surrogate turned primary home. I was not born here, but because of the amount of time invested into the city and the

community, it has seemed as though I was born here. I share many moments of ephemeral treasure here; I have met many people, many friends. I am certain that I would not be the person I am today, if I hadn't moved to Worcester. (Female high school senior 2020 cohort)

Worcester is a home it's the place where I've grew up and have the most memories both good and bad. The map exercise helps, and I still see it the same way my home. (Male high school senior 2020 cohort)

Worcester to me is my home city and a place of refuge for my mom's side of the family. The place where all my friends and most of my family are from. (Female high school sophomore).

I'm new to Worcester, Worcester is my home. (Male high school first-year student, 2020 cohort)

Inclusion and Exclusion. For the young people, spatial belonging was tied to inclusion and exclusion within spaces. From their narratives, I found that educational spaces, informal and formal community youth engagement and volunteering created feelings of inclusion or exclusion. Within these spaces, they could blur certain boundaries associated with belonging. Public spaces such as parks and ethnic food restaurants such as noodle shops and boba tea restaurants were places many participants felt connected to and fostered relationships with their peers. Within these spaces, belonging manifested itself in two ways. Firstly, spaces that the young people hated due to exclusion, and secondly, spaces where they felt connected because it made them feel safe, treated with dignity, and supported in relationship building. Belonging was seen as tenuous and

served to reinforce boundaries associated with the everyday actions of exclusion of immigrants and people of color within school settings. A female high school senior from the 2020 cohort shared their shifting and contested connections to Worcester, which illustrates the tenuous nature of belonging:

Through my time living here, I've grown to gradually learn about all the places Worcester has provided for me. Like any person living in a city all their life, we learn and memorize neighborhoods, streets, and places for recreation that we all correlate memories to. But as I've matured into my years of adolescence, my feelings toward Worcester have changed. This city has become very uninteresting and repetitive to me, in a way that I feel like there's only so much to do and so many places to go, which I find very ironic, because I'm in a course called 'Making Worcester Home' (lol). I constantly find myself musing over moving out of the state in the future to a bigger busier city, or to be closer to my mom's side of the family. I think a factor of this shift of attitude could also stem from the fact that I'm soon entering college and have begun doing so much research and just simply want a challenge for change, or a new beginning.

Feelings of exclusion, limited access to resources in guidance counseling, AP classes, and afterschool school programming were mentioned during their conversations as they explored their YPAR project on funding for afterschool programming. Although not always explicit, these conversations show emerging formulations of thoughts on belonging within space and structures; belonging within this context focuses on access,

inclusion, exclusion, and adequate resources, i.e., funding. For some students, a lack of access was due to resources; for others, access was limited based on their family circumstances. Some students shared that as children of newcomers and immigrants, they had to work to increase their family's self-sufficiency and could not engage in afterschool programming.

Boundaries. While for others, it related explicitly to boundaries which manifested itself in biases shown by guidance counselors and teachers. Many students talked about having under-resourced schools and limited academic guidance, making them feel ill-prepared for college, creating instances of exclusion, and knowing they could go to college and access funding. A male high school junior from the 2019 cohort had this to say about feeling excluded due to access to academic counseling:

Go through high school and take the templated schedule.... should have mentoring sessions in what kinds of jobs are out there, what is the demand for workforce right now Knowing work demands is important because you need to know what jobs are available out there to pay for student loans. Only students who take AP classes feel prepared for college. If you don't have a chance to take AP classes, you won't know as much detail about things as you would in a regular class (which make you less prepared for college). As a junior in high school, I don't feel very prepare for college due to many things. My counselors, like they have like biases.

Another student shared that:

The people who were born here or something, non-refugee, and they tend to, like, you know, know, every teacher is like what you said, you need to get a good teacher. And at the same time, you know, they get much more resourced compared to other people, so I have no idea what's going on. I was invited to honor society, but I do not know until like I was invited.

Sense of Home. The concepts of belonging and a sense of home are strongly associated with space and place; these can be actual places/spaces such as neighborhoods, city areas, streets, parks, hangout spots, and landmarks. Spaces are sometimes more symbolic, virtual, or imagined. Attachment to these spaces is sometimes contested and threatened by safety, freedom, alienation, and inequality issues. Urban green spaces offered sites of more inclusive respite for the young people as these spaces allowed for removing certain boundaries attached to belonging. Although one student reported being bullied at a park, the others reported that these spaces allowed them to connect with friends and people in their social networks, meet people not from their neighbors, and engage in outdoor activities that supported wellbeing. These urban green spaces were seen as respite and helped the young people feel a sense of belonging. Evident in the students' PhotoVoice project and mapping activity, which had images of green spaces and parks as places that hold significance to them.

Connection to Place. From the students' mapping exercise, they identified places where they hung out and where they felt included, represented, and connected. These included public parks in the city such as Elm and Green Hill parks, boba tea shops, friend's homes, and SECA. Schools were also identified as significant; however, the

students identified that school was significant because they spend more time at school than in other places. Three drawings showing places that hold significance to the students are presented. These drawings show clear overlaps. In each drawing, their neighborhoods, the downtown area, and spaces where they engage in after-school activities were highlighted:

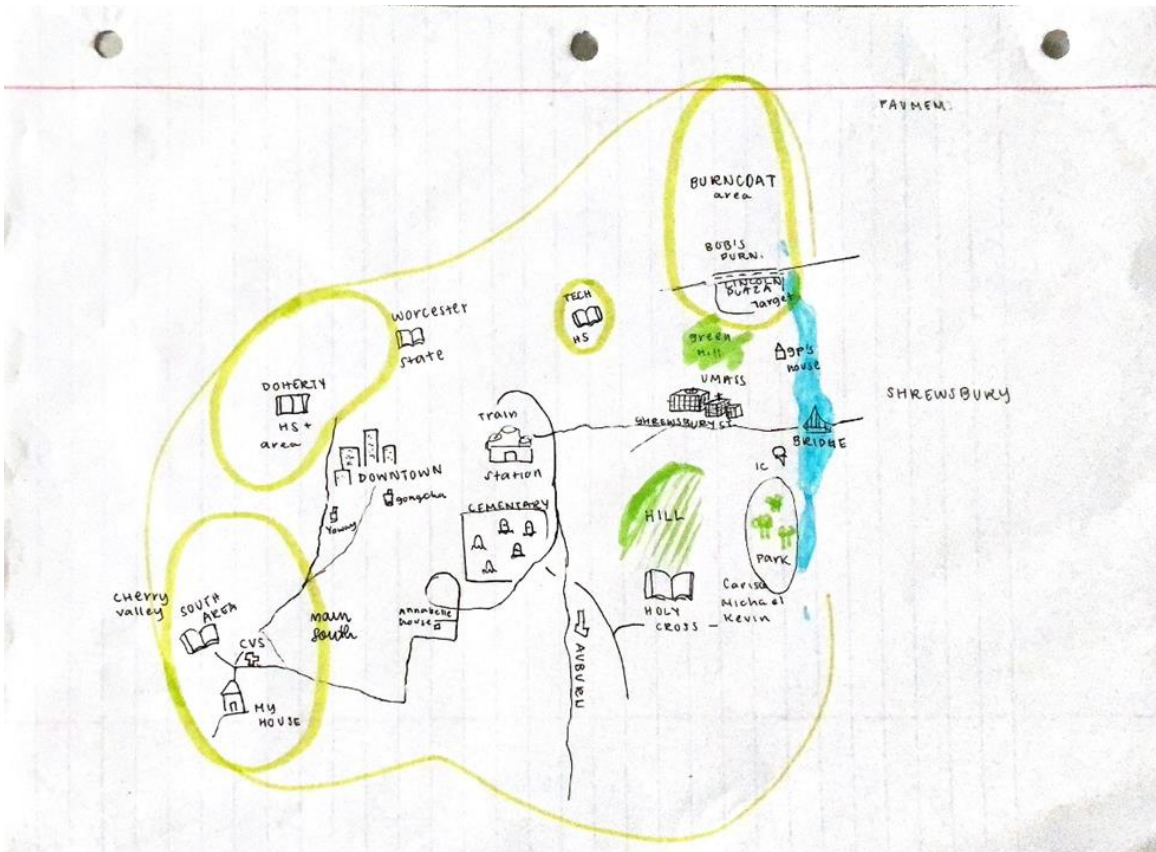


Figure 1: A female high school senior from the 2020 cohort map represents places that hold significance in Worcester, where they experience social inclusion, belonging, and safety.

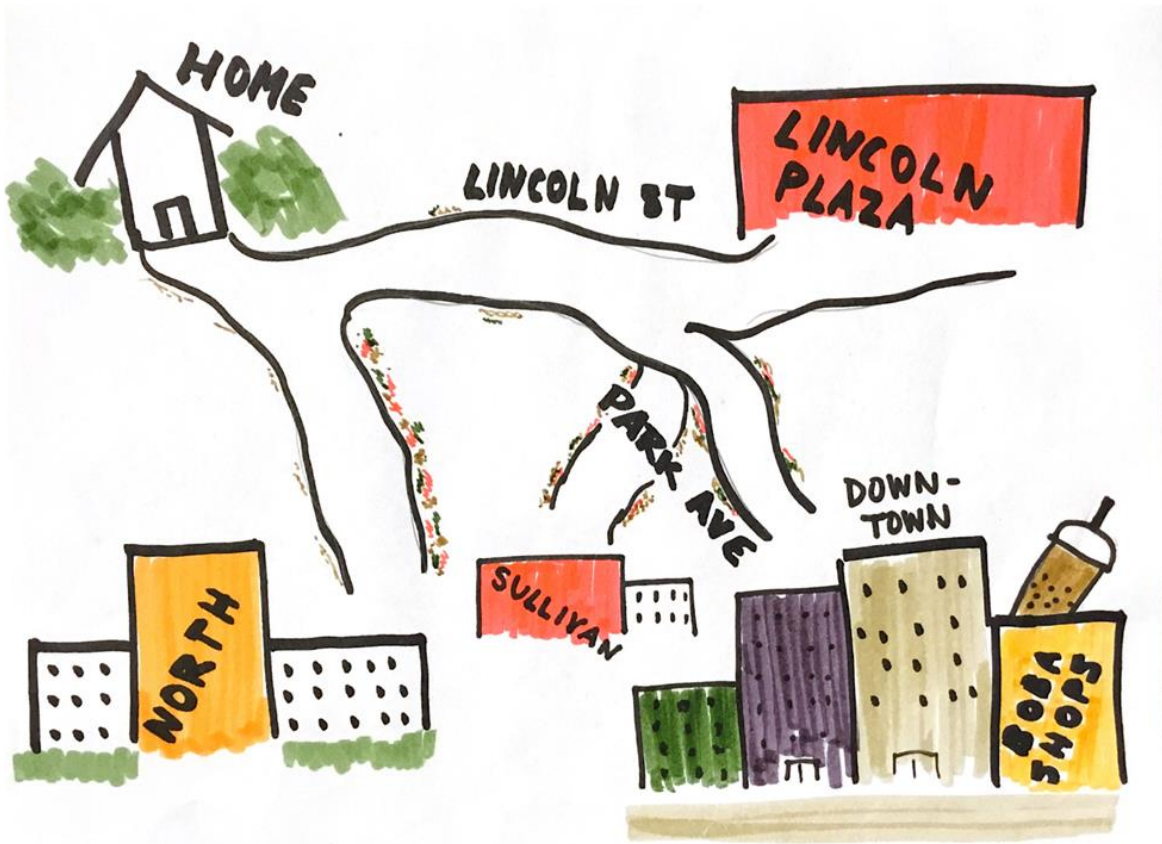


Figure 2: A female high school sophomore from the 2020 cohort map represents Worcester, showing places where they felt included and frequent regularly.

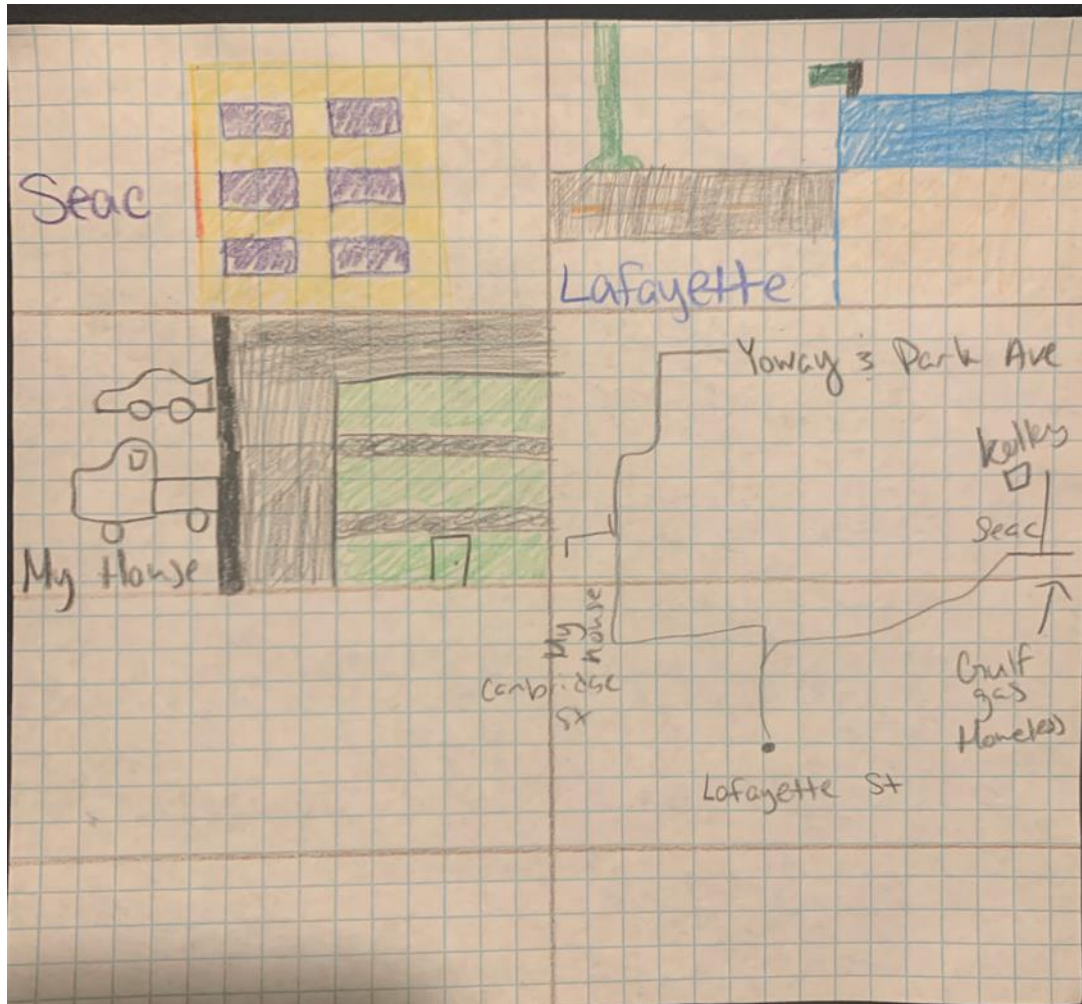


Figure 3: A male high school senior from the 2020 cohort map representation of places that hold significance in Worcester.

Privilege. Spatial belonging also emerged as being associated with privilege, which allowed the young people freedom to move around the city, between racial and ethnic-specific spaces, and to claim multiple spaces of belonging. This multiplicity of belonging does have its downsides, as some youth reported feelings of constantly being judged by others. Their belonging is questioned within and outside their ethnic communities and nationally because of doubts about where their loyalties lie. Particularly for the 2020 cohort, they shared instances where they observed on social media and in

traditional media where Asian Americans' loyalty was questioned as a part of the Anti-Asian hate in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

A piece of this multiplicity of belonging is associated with those who can pass, or the system accepts; however, those suspected of being other are not allowed access to belonging. For those participants who were foreign-born naturalized Americans and those entering the US as refugees, they referenced instances in school where they were placed in ESL, remedial and special education classes because of their accents. A female junior high schooler from the 2020 cohort spoke of having to defend being Southeast Asian because she is darker in complexion and is from a mixed-race family, even though she does not identify as mixed race. She shared that she does not experience belonging among the Asian children at school or the black students. Two of the three students from the 2019 cohort who self-identified as refugees shared that while they were able to integrate into their school easily in some respects because of its large Southeast Asian population; there were instances when they first arrived and wore more traditional types of dress that other students even Asian students make fun of their clothes and made them feel like they do not belong. A male student among the three shared that they were encouraged by their Asian friends to adopt American culture and dress so that they do not stand out.

Despite having other forms of belonging through US legal immigration status or birth, the students reported being constantly reminded that they do not belong and are foreign. A female senior from the 2020 cohort shared an article about anti-Asian hate crimes as part of an assignment to explore their research topic, which focused on hate

crimes. In her journal, the formulation of ethnic and spatial belonging emerged. She stated that:

Right now, in all our lives, there is global unrest, between the virus, political movements, and divided communities. In one of the articles "The Slur I Never Expected to Hear in 2020" a young Asian- American girl talks about the start of the virus and at first joked about it, but then soon took it more seriously. This girl was scared because she didn't want to leave her house due to being a victim of a hate crime.

Participants shared the need to make connections to people and places. These connections to places are spawned from opportunities to participate in various school and community activities and establish pathways for establishing a sense of belonging.

Intersectionality and Social Location

Discrimination and Privilege. Belonging as being defined by social location is another emerging theme from our findings. Discrimination and privilege were central concepts in the students' discussions. The 2019 and 2020 cohorts spoke to the discrimination they perceived or experienced in educational and community settings. However, the 2020 cohort discussion was rooted within the context of the social unrest in 2020 resulting from anti-black police lynchings, disparities in COVID-19 impact on immigrants and communities of color, and media representation of tensions between immigrant/newcomer groups. Through these lenses, they tried to make meaning of belonging while experiencing othering and discrimination. Belonging associated with their social location was also connected to their discussions about privileges and

discrimination in the context of support received from guidance counselors regarding college readiness and access to afterschool programming. Although not explicitly articulated social location impacted their feelings of belonging, some of the students were able to link their experiences with barriers to accessing educational, language, and cultural supports in school to their race and immigration status. These identities caused them to feel othered or feeling like an outsider. Many of their experiences of inclusion or exclusion were rooted in how their social location impacted their ability to “fit in or pass.” A female sophomore from the 2020 cohort spoke of a time they experienced discrimination from a peer because of their appearance and race and how that impacted their sense of self and identity, leading them to question if they belonged. The following excerpt from her conversation capture how she felt:

To be honest, one time this girl judged me by my appearance, and it really affected me and made me feel bad about myself, that's when I stopped to focus on myself, so when people ask me what I think about myself I don't really know because the society has made me feel bad about myself that I don't even care about myself. That made me realize that I don't really know myself anymore.

Intersectionality plays a significant part in the young people's sense of belonging, as there are aspects of who they are that are socially acceptable and others that are not. Some students shared that while they felt accepted within educational settings, they acknowledged being impacted by structural racism and micro-aggressions. Despite some of the students being upfront in saying that they were not always able to identify

discrimination, they often pass it off as not serious because it was in the form of a joke or stereotyping. From their arguments, there is evidence that they feel both belonging and unbelonging within these spaces simultaneously. Race, gender, sexuality, and culture were some of the most common characteristics which impacted their sense of belonging. Some male students shared that they experienced instances where their sexual orientation was questioned. They felt discriminated against and excluded from peer groups because they did not display certain hyper-masculinity traits, which other students did not always associate with being Asian. The students recognized that specific social characteristics offered privileges, such as being a non-black male heterosexual instead of being black or a woman.

Under the unit of identity in the course, using three guiding questions, the youth were asked to comment on:

1. How did the session make you feel?
2. How do you see yourself?
3. How do you think you are perceived within society, and how do societal perceptions impact your feelings of belonging to Worcester?

Many youths could articulate that how they see themselves is not the same way society sees them. Because of the disparities, some young people experienced othering, which highlights ways a sense of belonging emerged from their conversations. One high school junior from the 2019 cohort put it this way as they expressed how aspects of their social location impacted how they are seen:

Today's sessions made me more mindful of people's culture, names, and identity. Some people's culture is different, and some people have different aspects of themselves. For example, our parents might not see the person that we are around our friends. I can't exactly see how society sees me, but how I think society sees me is as a young Asian girl that goes to school and is pretty quiet.

Generational Differences. Differences between the participants and older generations of their families and communities were a common sub-theme of intersectionality and social location that kept coming up in the students' discussions, which impacted their sense of belonging. The students shared that the younger generation and American-born Asian-Americans belonging to them differed from their immigrant parents and grandparents, especially those who lived in mixed immigration status families. Some students mused that being identified as the model minority and a desired non-white racial group allowed them privileges and access. However, they were mindful that their elders did not have the same experiences and were subjected to anti-Asian immigration controls and discrimination. These differences in experiences impacted ideology, political opinions, and racial views between their generations and those of their elders. Many expressed that because of the lack of their elders' language capacity to speak English, they are still seen and treated as foreigners who do not belong. Because of generational differences, younger generations experienced tensions within their families and ethnic communities during the 2020 racial uprising stemming from the murder of George Floyd by the police. Many students identified as Gen Z stated that they felt ashamed of remarks made by family members or were afraid to speak out or be in

solidarity with the Black Lives Matter movement. Others felt conflicted because some Asian and Asian Americans were the target of hate crimes by Black people due to the COVID-pandemic and the protest that followed Floyd's murder. The excerpts below highlight some of the tensions that the students wrestled with:

I hope this project brings impact through raising awareness of topics we try to avoid or might be scared to be confrontational with. I think many of our (Gen Z) ideas contrast with the older generation. (Female high school senior, 2020 cohort)

"This project relates to my life as I live with immigrant relatives who sometimes still casually make racist remarks or assumptions through misperceptions out of something they might have personally experienced or because of what they've been told/heard about it. (Male high school senior, 2020 cohort)

The data found that identity, self-perception, and a sense of belonging in many young people were affected by their social location and intersectional identities. Some of the identities in some contexts created feelings of un-belonging, while in other contexts created belonging, which was primarily manifested in inclusion or exclusion from specific spaces. Although not very explicit in their conversations, there were traces of the beginning stages of them speaking to trans-locational positionality related to social boundaries and hierarchies associated with belonging.

Trans-locational positionality is a theoretical framework used to examine how multi-cultural individuals navigate ethnoculturally diverse settings. The concept

emphasizes social position (the outcome of social practices, actions, and meanings) and social positioning (the process of social actions, practices, and purpose in a social context). It recognizes the importance of context, the impact of locations, and the contradiction that arises from the multi-position one occupies in society (Anthias, 2001, 2002, 2007). Anthias (2001) posits that those identities such as culture, language, and country of origin function as resources for individuals contextually and situationally. Therefore, trans-locational positionality addresses identity in relation to locations which not fixed but are impacted by context and time and involve shifts and contradictions. Attention is also paid to social locations and processes.

Boundaries – belonging as inclusion and exclusion

Belonging related to social inclusion and boundary-making emerged as a theme within the young people's discussions of media representation of newcomer communities and interpersonal inequality/discrimination. The students alluded to increased scrutiny and vetting of some newcomer groups and the anti-Asian attacks due to COVID-19 as examples of systemic exclusion of groups deemed a threat and needed to be kept out. Themes of belonging were associated with inclusion or exclusion linked to racism, the social unrest of 2020, and college readiness supports. A female high school senior from the 2020 cohort had this to say about the increase in anti-Asian racism, which contributed to feelings of othering; this discussion was within the context of their group project on hate crimes:

A lot of people can be ignorant and just assume every Asian is Chinese and has covid, so it can be a bit annoying and hurtful when people make

jokes about things like that or genuinely mean it. I have personally never had a hate crime happen to me or anyone I know. For my community and school there are hate crimes that do happen around people are getting hurt because they support BLM or young kids around the block are getting shot because they are associated with certain people, and it is not okay. There is so much violence in this city and it is bringing down the youth.

The findings suggested that the young people engaged in code-switching to maintain congruency in their beliefs and identity with their environment, showing that belonging for them was more skewed toward being included than excluded.

Othering. As mentioned in the previous section, several participants reported that they experienced othering; in some ways, they alluded to the fact that this seems unavoidable in certain circumstances due to structural racism and societal barriers that create unbelonging for minoritized and immigrant communities. These societal barriers were represented by a chain-link fence in two photographs from the students' PhotoVoice in 2019.



Figure 4: A picture from the PhotoVoice project of a college first-year student from the 2019 cohort of a chain-link fence represents barriers and newcomers' limited economic access.



Figure 5: A picture from the photovoice project of the 2019 cohort of a chain-link fence, representing barriers and limited access to education and academic support for newcomers.

In describing the above photograph, the student had this to say:

Income inequality - peoples' races and backgrounds contribute to lack of job opportunities related to underfunding in schools' infrastructure may be poor could have taken photo being on the fence but instead, chose to take picture from behind the fence representing a barrier to use.

Underprivileged students don't have opportunity to work with organizations that help you to prepare for the exam.....

Boundaries. The photographs also encapsulate the division and boundaries within their city, worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic. Several students discussed the pandemic's disparities and the media's role in stoking division. The following excerpt highlight how the students were processing inclusion and exclusion related to belonging based on ethnicity, race, and the COVID-19 pandemic:

The inequalities in our city have divided us during the pandemic for sure. With the protest going on and the pandemic still being a thing it is hard to actually physically be at the protest and support, but we can always support in other ways. It has divided us more though because lots of people don't agree on the same things. Something that makes me hopeful is seeing other countries being able to get past the pandemic, but what makes me worry is that our country isn't getting any better. (Female high school senior, 2020 cohort)

Another student, a female high school senior, highlighted the role of the media in creating tension, division, and unbelonging for people of color:

Yes, the media does depict the influx of tension between immigrant/newcomer businesses and POC communities, especially within this year with the events of COVID and the BLM movement. They're indicated through a variety of sources all throughout the media whether by news article, social media, or by photo & video proof. Throughout the past

months we've seen various passages, videos, and photos throughout the media of discriminatory acts and hate speech towards Asians. I don't think it helped either that our president publicly called it the "Chinese virus," which has only fed into the fire and influenced more racist people to act upon it.

Racism. At the root of the students' discussions was how racism is used as a tool for social exclusion and boundary-making for immigrants. A male high school senior from the 2020 cohort spoke of unconscious biases and how they are more common than hate crimes, causing othering of people:

I agree with the sentiment, as finding individuals who would be willing to share their experiences will be hard, as I do not believe that the majority of society has experienced hate crimes firsthand. Racism on the other hand, is more likely to be witnessed by everyone, as it does not only include crimes and violence, but also the passive-aggressive and unconscious behaviors of individuals.

Othering. I use the term othering as an umbrella term to represent actions, beliefs, and comments experienced by the participants. The students' conversation about anti-Asian racism, hate crimes, and intergenerational racial bias spoke to how people from newcomer and refugee backgrounds were held to unequal standards, targeted for being different, and mistreated due to structural systems designed to exclude them. The participants reported feeling othered even when they were held in higher esteem than other racial groups as model minorities. Othering contributed to them feeling

uncomfortable, isolated, and misrepresented or stereotyped. They gave examples of classmates making fun of them for being Asian and bad at Math or not knowing karate. Reflecting on their collective experiences, the participants experienced othering based on societal attitudes and interactions with their teachers and peers who are not from refugee backgrounds.

Within the various group discussions of the students, there were discourses of belonging as integration and tolerance of differences in culture, ethnicity, and race, which were manifested in their everyday experiences. These experiences forced the youth to police their self-conscious representation of self and manipulate boundaries of belonging. In a discussion about how others see them, the young people's identities emerge within the dialogue of multiculturalism. A high school sophomore from the 2019 cohort said, "with friends, I could be as Asian as I want to be, but when I am in school, I try not to be so that people do not say I am weird.... it's almost like you must switch up who you are."

Dual Identities

Integration. From what the participants shared within their multicultural white-majority city, the expectations, and pressures to fit in (integrate) are placed on them. Their narratives spoke of the need to fit into American culture; however, they noted that they do not control whether they are accepted or included. Their argument alluded to the fact that they live in a white-majority city, and decisions within their schools are determined by a white school administration, mostly in favor of white students. Their arguments can also be linked to state control boundary of belonging, as the state determines those granted and denied privileges. Within their arguments, belonging goes

beyond citizenship and immigration status; instead, it is about cultural and social acceptance. For the young people to integrate, they must often obscure their racial differences on the one hand, but on the other, it is celebrated; this was paradoxical and confusing to some participants.

In their discussion around school resources, the students referenced the attention given to their white colleagues by guidance counselors to help them with college preparations to the disadvantage of students of color. They also spoke of the disproportionate number of students of color left out of AP classes, and insidious racism coached in color-blind school policies as evidence of the power of being white and the access it grants. These examples can be linked to how the construction of whiteness as privilege preserves inevitable dominance and reinforces power dynamics through which the boundaries of national belonging are established.

Self-policing Culture. Their discussions mentioned self-policing of their culture to fit in and experience belonging. These forms of policing included engaging in teasing and insults around aspects of their culture, language, and practices that made them less American. This allowed them to police the boundaries of who belonged and to formulate their sense of self through identification and disassociation with each other. Symbolic ethnic capital in claims of Americanness and ethnicness were central to their sense of themselves and engagement within their community. Mobilizing this capital helped cultivate identity, belonging, and engagement in a multicultural context. The participants' concerns with authenticity and Americanness points to the tension between their desires for self-representation and what is imposed on them by others. Because they must

perform their Americanness, they expressed that they struggle with feelings of inadequacy. These performances occurred in schools and spaces where they were invited to merge with other cultural groups. While they formally performed representation as authentic to ensure belonging, they must exercise flexibility in order to transition boundaries.

Feeling Supported and Well Resourced

Access to Resources. Belonging was wrapped up in feelings of support and access to resources for the students. Formulations of belonging featured prominently in their discussions on school funding for sports, afterschool programming, and support for college readiness; within their discussions, the students identified limited school resources and support from teachers as issues that they struggle with, which they believe are tied to their race and immigration status. Many students attend schools serving low-income communities of color and immigrants, which are significantly underfunded. In their projects and discussions, the students highlighted the challenges of urban education and the lack of attention to racial dynamics and inequities contributing to students' unbelonging. In many ways, we saw neoliberalism's reinforcement within these educational settings, which safeguards and reinforces white supremacy disguised as providing equal opportunities for all in a race-neutral and colorblind environment. The students' projects on school funding and college readiness showed that newcomers and refugee youth, especially language learners, remain racialized and invisible. Emerging from the students' discussions were challenges they faced concerning race, language inequities, and supportive services that did not make them college ready. One student

from the 2019 cohort identified the following limited school resources as part of their brainstorming exercise for their YPAR project:

Schools don't have enough resources; need extra program organization within that school for students who advocate for themselves; hard to talk to guidance counselor because they are always busy 3000 students at South High; applying to college is very hard - only guidance counselor to help; difficult to ask for letters of recommendations or references (jobs or programs you apply to ask for those).

These challenges impact their sense of belonging. Many refugee students shared that they were forced to take English as a Second Language (ESL) classes or placed in special education classes because they had an accent. There were mixed feelings about ESL classes as some students found it helpful to improve their language capacity while others felt it was yet another way to create othering. Evident in their conversation was using ESL as a panacea for all their needs. Many shared that they needed help to select courses that would put them on college tracks and be selected for AP classes while also getting language and cultural support. Others shared that they needed more academic support from teachers and guidance counselors. A 1st-year college student from the 2019 cohort shared that they only realized how subpar their high school education was when they became a student at Worcester State University and realized there were many resources for student loans and academic support. Instead of receiving support from their school, they received college preparatory services from federally funded college prep

programs such as Upward Bound and Dynamy and afterschool programming for low-income and first-generation college students.

Economic Self-Sufficiency. The students made linkages between poor educational outcomes and their ability to be economically self-sufficient and how having lower educational achievements in a community contributes to economic blight, crime, and surveillance by the state. A 1st-year female college student from 2019 articulated that:

Quality of education – lower-income neighborhoods have less attention in their schools

How does it impact students: limited learning and critical thinking schools, standardized testing is difficult, college might not be an option/more difficulty getting into college, can lead to more crime - are they more policed? Income inequality - peoples' races and backgrounds contribute to the lack of job opportunities related to underfunding in schools' infrastructure may be poor.

The students could connect broader political, economic, and sociological factors that contributed to some of the limited support they received in school. Standardized testing and the lack of cultural humility among teachers and school administrators were barriers to success for newcomers and refugees in college and workforce readiness. The students viewed these challenges through their lens as immigrants and low-income individuals and not so much about belonging. However, within their arguments are issues

related to inclusion and exclusion, the beginning stages of formulating thoughts on belonging as people from refugee backgrounds within their context.

Belonging Through Activism and Community Change

Framing change and developing a community action plan were important aspects of the young people's YPAR project. Emerging themes from their discussions were calls for school funding change, social activism as change, education as change, the role of social media in mass mobilization, and negotiations of their places in social justice activism and community change. Relating to activism and solidarity with social justice movements such as BLM, many students shared that they sometimes found themselves in spaces of tension regarding solidarity with social justice movements. Despite experiencing challenges of belonging in spaces of social justice activism, many young people believe that political activism encourages agency, which is often not associated with refugees due to conflicts of representation. Because being a refugee often is associated with disempowering representation and agency. For many people from refugee backgrounds, intersectional identities restrict political activism. Since many newcomer families are focused on economic self-sufficiency, there is little time to focus on political issues. The legal risk associated with protest movements is a deterrence for newcomers, refugees, and mixed-status families because potential arrest at protests and marches could negatively impact their abilities to become US citizens. Citizenship is the ultimate legal form of belonging because it is tied to privileges and state protection.

Many students reported that they were not actively engaged in activism and that their activism was localized to social media. Some of the students felt that they did not

have the power to change anything on a large scale but could make a difference in their social circles. One student put it this way:

I do not have the capability to incentivize equality for large groups of people. All I have the power to do is control the way I think, and how I understand the problems surrounding racial issues. With a bit of knowledge on the matter, I can then spread the message to others through social media or perhaps simply through a casual conversation. At the end of the day, the only person who has enough power to decide what I think about racial justice is myself.

Racial justice and hate crime were the only types of activism the students focused on for their projects. Many students believe that education as a form of activism is the solution to having a more equitable society. They argued that equity would create belonging for newcomers and people from refugee backgrounds while simultaneously removing barriers faced by marginalized communities. The excerpt below shows how the youth were brainstorming ways in which they could actively get involved:

What can we do to minimize or eliminate this? What can we do to improve the situation?

Educating people: public education campaigns through social media, storytelling, narratives, call into state rep./AG (Attorney General) Hate and Bias Division, Worcester City Task Force (Against Bias and Hate).

Education: more funding and resources to schools and teachers

Hate crimes - mentality, ideology could be changed more easily?

Another spoke about spreading awareness and standing in solidarity using social media to reduce the legal risk associated with protest actions:

social media could help so much to spread more awareness with racism or racial justice. I would say a peaceful protest but seeing after what happened with the BLM movement, I feel like showing people the problem through other ways would be better such as through social media or even through highways build board (billboards).

Social media actively engaged intergenerational groups of people for activism and social change. The young people saw themselves as change agents; however, not in the traditional active roles of social activism but more as influencers who periodically have a social justice platform. One student said:

We hope it can help different ages, ethnic groups, and a lot people see what racism really is and help them understand more about it. Although they are the ones who have the powers to make the changes, we hope that with this project it can impact them and hopefully help make the changes.

Belonging emerged as utilizing social media and more non-traditional media to communicate messages about inclusion, social justice, and anti-racism social movement. The students also pushed for passivity with social justice activism while encouraging others to get involved in activism. Social media was seen as a perfect substitute tool and approach because many people from refugee backgrounds do not have prominent places in leadership roles within existing mass movements. Through their narratives, the concept

of belonging emerged as inclusion and improved equity, resulting in access for all. They also identified relationships with their families, ethnocultural community, school friends, and friends from extracurricular activities, including school support teams and ethnic youth groups, as pathways to developing a sense of belonging and community. Traditional pathways such as legal rights, citizenship, and access to support educational and government support contributed to a greater sense of belonging.

Discussion

This study aimed to describe and interpret how students in the Making Worcester Home YPAR project formulated thoughts on the concept of belonging as they completed the course, and their action research projects. While the overarching goal of the Making Worcester Home project was to encourage belonging through activism for young people from refugee backgrounds, its explicit focus was not on deducing how the young people were defining refugee belonging. Outside of the first unit, which asked the young people what Worcester meant to them and their identity, there was no formal engagement with the concept of belonging in the course. From my literature review, there are no qualitative studies that specifically explore how the concept of belonging is described using refugee voices.

In this study, the student participants are not describing what it means to belong; however, from their discussions, class projects, and writing, I distill early formulation of thoughts on belonging since they were not precisely asked to define belonging. My focus was on the young people's thoughts to center their voices so that my study would generate new knowledge that would inform changes or improvements to how we engage

young people from refugee backgrounds. While each participant presented their unique experiences, there were overlaps that produced the overarching themes. Since the participants did not provide explicit definitions of belonging, the discussion of their experiences and reflections offers a glimpse into how they made sense of those experiences and the world around them.

Thoughts on belonging for these young people emerged from their relationship to place. They talked about their relationship with the city as home and places that held significance to their identities. Anthias (2016) argued that belonging has spatial dimensions, involving actual spaces and places where people are accepted as members or feel they belong. Anthias relate belonging to social inclusion and boundary-making. Yuval-Davis (2007), on the other hand, in her argument about the politics of belonging, speaks to the role of the nation-state in developing boundaries or social controls to regulate and prevent belonging. Yuval-Davis's boundaries to belonging can be linked to Foucault's argument about the nation-state mechanisms to shape or affect the conduct of people through social control. Within our findings, the student alluded to the use of immigration control and privileges associated with citizens and legal status, which are used to create feelings of unbelonging and police those who are allowed to feel a sense of belonging.

The research findings show that the students were in the incipient stages of formulating thoughts on belonging involving the reconstitution of social identities when they gave examples of the need to be more American in specific spaces, which means assimilating and denying or hiding their cultural and ethnic identities. The students'

connection of belonging with identity aligns with how scholars across migration and transdisciplinary studies view the concept associated with attachment, identities, ties, and spatiality. (Anthias, 2016; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, Patusky, Bouwsema, & Collier, 1992; Probyn, 1996; Mackenzie, 2004; Madsen & van Naerssen, 2003; Yuval-Davis, 2006). Bennet (2014) spoke of spatial embodiments of belonging, which often evoke past, present, and future sense of belonging; within our findings, I saw emerging thoughts of embodied belonging; however, the students did not articulate thoughts about the fluidity of belonging and its connections to the past as well as the future. Black (2009) furthered the concept of embodied sense of belonging, arguing that connections with spaces are tied to the representation of self or relationships and can be spaces, places, and material objects used to contest boundaries and identities. Ottosson (2014) and Youkhanna (2015) gave examples of newcomer communities using murals, street names, and art to contest boundaries associated with the politics of belonging to signify their community identity. Belonging is associated with embodied practices and cultural rituals. For many newcomer communities and refugees, place is experienced through our senses which scholars refer to as emotional geography and embodied through quotidian practices. This embodied knowledge of place accumulates with time and becomes part of our subjective self. Displacement, marginalization, and exclusion cause rupture of our embodied belonging; however, in some communities, spaces of resistance are created to repair this rupture (May 2013, p. 138). The students' thoughts on belonging did not extend to embodied belonging and spaces of resistance or contested belonging because they were unfamiliar with the terminology. However, they were involved in

spaces of resistance and embodied practices through their participation in culturally specific programming, ethnic festivals, and cultural practices such as the dragon dance.

The research participants described the city as home or a second home, where they had significant familial relationships and friendships and where aspects of their identities were developed. They were beginning to formulate thoughts on spatial belonging regarding inclusion or exclusion in physical spaces in schools, urban green spaces, neighborhoods, the city center, or business and community organizations. Their thoughts centered on attachments, access, safety, freedom, and privileges. This finding is congruent with the definition of a sense of belonging, as Walseth (2006) posited, who argues that belonging incorporates geographic and familial affiliations tied to social experiences and close personal relationships. Belonging in this sense has an element of mutual support and is further solidified through activism and participation in community life. The theorization of belonging from the students' discussions aligns with Caxaj (2010), who argued that "belonging involves a cumulation mediated influences of inclusion and exclusion on spatial, symbolic, and social relationships. The students' discussions focused on belonging within specific physical spaces, which supported building social relationships that contributed to feelings of belonging. Although this was not presented in the findings because it was an outlier, students who were gamers, belonging for them included virtual reality and virtual spaces, which became even more helpful for those in the 2020 cohort during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Like Caxaj (2010), the students expressed experiences with boundaries marked by inclusion and exclusion that were geographic in nature as constituting spaces where they

experience belonging. Caxaj (2010) believes that boundaries to belonging are racialized, gendered, and economic. He argued that belonging is contextual and multidimensional, a changing process influenced by personal and environmental factors. It is transient and involves connectedness, positive interactions, and performance identity. Within the students' discussions, elements of the performative nature of identity emerged in the context that they had to perform their Americanness in specific settings, while in others, they must be more ethnic. This performance of identities was not so much a means of developing a sense of belonging, but rather, it was a way to control how they are perceived. What the students described can be linked to Judith Butler's theory of performativity, but instead of being linked to gender, it is linked to their refugeeness.

In her theory, Butler argues that gender is a collective of acts that are repetitively performed to ensure conformity and produce compliance within hegemonic cultures (Butler, 1999). Within Butler's theory, I argue that newcomerness and refugeeness constitute a performative process. More precisely, I define newcomerness and refugeeness as a social construction of what is the typical expectation of people who are refugees and newcomers. This construction changes over time and varies depending on the place and performers. This performance is constantly being recreated and performed in social interactions. There were differences in how the students thought of belonging, including elements of safety, freedom, and privileges, and not just in the confines of exclusion and inclusion. One might argue that inclusion does not always equate to physical and emotional safety, which is one of the points of divergence compared to the literature. Connections to identity, self and group trust, and commitment to their ethnic communities also emerged in their discussions; these concepts are linked to Bollen

(1990) and Chavis (1986), who argue that belonging constitutes connections between individuals and groups association.

According to Hagerty et al. (1992) and Baumeister and Leary (1995), a sense of belonging includes valued involvement, frequent interactions, and fit and stable relationships. Belonging is strongly associated with peoples' perception that their beliefs, values, and lifestyle are congruent with their physical environments; this congruency supports positive social interactions and stability of relationships. They wanted to have feelings of comfort, purpose, confidence in their identities, and adoption, although they did not always have the freedom to do so due to boundaries of belonging tied to white supremacy.

From our findings, the students were not articulating thoughts of belonging as a continuous process but were taking a perspective of one arriving at a final place of acceptance. However, a few students spoke about outgrowing the city of Worcester and not feeling connected to it anymore. Meaning they were challenging spatial belonging as being a static process. Their challenge to the linear progress of belonging aligns with the arguments made by Antonsich (2010), who described belonging as a dynamic and situational concept that shifts with time. Other literature described belonging as a process of becoming rather than a state of being. Krzyanowski & Wodak (2007) spoke of the plurality of belonging that can be contested and influenced spatially and has a racial and ethnic dimension. For Anthias (2006), gender is central to belonging and boundary formation in the politics of belonging, while Yuval-Davis (2011) encouraged using an intersectional lens that focuses on social location. Anthias and Yuval-Davis's approaches

were not articulated in the students' discussion explicitly; however, the students were able to connect racial identity to the concept of belonging. When the students spoke of belonging as safety and stable relationships, their argument correlates to Baumeister and Leary's (1995) idea that safety, ownership, and stability in relationships are necessary to develop belonging.

Intersectionality and social location emerged as themes in our findings to describe how students conceptualized belonging. Although the students did not utilize these terms, they were familiar with intersectionality after reading Ibram X. Kendi's "How to Be an Antiracist" to understand more about racial justice and white supremacy. The students did not explicitly speak about social locations as they discussed discrimination, privilege, and experiences with access to resources. However, discussions about lack of educational support for college readiness, language support for ESL students, remedial support for those students whose education was disrupted through forced migration, and an overall educational environment employing cultural humility were prominent issues to them. Through these discussions, I saw the beginning thoughts of how they are articulating how their race, ethnicity, and immigration status create instances of othering for them. From their examples, I distill that their experiences of inclusion or exclusion were rooted in how their social location impacted their ability to fit in or access passing privileges. Their thoughts align with Cueto et al. (2010) arguments that equate belonging to degrees of social connections within educational institutions to teachers and peers and perceived discrimination based on ethnicity and access to extracurricular activities.

The missing demographic data limited my analysis to determining how social location and intersectionality impacted the students, development of a sense of belonging. In their discussion, the students mentioned gender and sexual orientation as a reasonable basis for discrimination, but they did not explicitly share or connect sexual orientation or gender identity with belonging. However, from their conversation, I can distill initial thoughts on how they connect belonging to identity, which aligns with Anthia's (2008) trans-locational positionality concept. Anthias argue that belonging is a product of social location within an intersectional framework. She posits that belonging and identity are rationally produced and linked to social boundaries and hierarchies. Within the students' arguments about access to guidance counseling and academic advising being contingent on immigration status, I saw thoughts emerging on how social location created inclusion, exclusion, participation, and access, as argued to be a process of developing belonging by Anthias. Our finding alluded to other societal constructs of gender, class, ethnicity, and boundary-making as impacting how the students developed thoughts of a sense of belonging.

Anthias (2008) challenges the exclusion of other aspects of immigrants' social locations with diversity and integration discourses and practices, which aligns with some of the critical questions about assimilation that the young people in the study were beginning to think through as they explored the topic of college readiness for youth from newcomer and refugee backgrounds. Like the students' arguments about their shifting sense of belonging, Anthias says that belonging is not fixed to one place but can be tied to various locations in diverse ways and even to contradictory positions. The lens of intersectionality helps show how immigrants and people from refugee backgrounds must

negotiate ways to belong and unbelonging within spaces and social hierarchies.

Belonging is an active and changing process that is often in flux and allows for fluidity of belonging and multiple identities (May 2011; Mee, 2009; Krzyzsnowski & Wodak, 2007; Fruja Amthor, 2017, Probyn,1996)

Identity formation is aligned with young people's developmental stage; mentioned in the literature, like belonging, identity formation is an ongoing and complex process that tackles questions such as where and how one fits into society, who they are, and whom they are trying to become (Kiang & Fuligni, 2009; Nelson & Barry, 2005; Schwartz et al., 2005, Seider, 2007; Yuval-Davis, 2010). For the young people in the study, discussions around identity emerged as they explored their role in social justice mobilization and inter-generational bias and hate. They express struggles finding places within social justice movements due to tensions created by media between newcomer groups and tensions within their ethnic groups with their elders who have different experiences with belonging and unbelonging. The concepts of identity emerged from their discussion around funding for after-school programs and school sporting activities which are avenues to create belonging. Connecting identity as integral to belonging aligns with Bettez's (2010) definition of belonging as connected to identity in self-identity and identification with others.

Chavis et al. (1986) posit that belonging is characterized by mutual concern, connections, loyalty, trust, and assurance that personal needs will be met. Cueto et al. (2010) describe belonging within an educational setting as connections to teachers and peers, access to extracurricular activities, and perceptions of discrimination. Finn (1989)

speaks to dimensions of belonging, including feeling respected and supported and mediated by positive and negative encouragement from peers, teachers, other persons in authority, academic, and other success. All these definitions contain the term support, which aligns with our findings; the students identified the need to feel supported in their discussion on college readiness, school funding for sports, and after-school programming. They spoke of being othered and feeling unbelonging because they were unfamiliar with school systems, did not have language capacity, and were not provided with the requisite support they needed to be college ready. Unlike the literature, which focuses on emotional support, the student's thoughts on belonging extended to material supports, which can promote greater belonging.

Framing change for school funding, racial justice, and college readiness supports for people from newcomer and refugee backgrounds emerged from the students' YPAR projects. They framed change in four ways, the call for systems and institutional change, engagement in social justice activism, education as change, and social media mass mobilization as change. From the findings, the students struggle to figure out defined roles for themselves in activism and movements for change. While they were aware of movements such as the BLM movement, there existed some tensions between their ethnicity and racial identities and being in solidarity with movements for change. Many were moved to action based on traditional media and social media accounts of anti-Asian bias and hate but stopped short of formalizing their involvement. Change and social activism within their YPAR projects were articulated in public-facing activities to display their research findings; however, there was no commitment to continue to work for change on the identified issues. Lack of continuity is a limitation of the students' project

design, time, and commitment. Particularly for the 2020 cohort, much of their activism was focused on using social media to educate others in their social networks by retweeting messages from existing mass movements and some students expressing thoughts on joining local online activist groups.

In many ways, the young people saw their activism in the form of social media influencers than in the traditional ways that activism is viewed. Literature on refugee activism, their role in the solidarity movement, and social justice activism is sparse in the American context. However, some studies out of Europe focus on refugee political activists working on homeland issues during their transition and post-resettlement. Critical social capital emerged from existing scholarship on social change and youth activism. Ginwright (2007) argues that young people can develop activist identities by engaging in activities that promote political conciseness and community engagement, such as community youth programming. One explanation for the youth's inactivity in the social change movement might be their limited social capital. Ginwright's (2007) concept of critical social capital is described as collective interest networks, collective identities, mutual trust, and the common good that does not seem to exist for many newcomers' groups as they are not able to undertake certain political and legal risks that are associated with mass mobilization and protest. Tensions between racial and ethnic groups of newcomers stoked by the media add to barriers to having mutual trust and shared goals. Despite the approach focusing on change and harnessing racialized identities to support collective action.

Afterschool programming, especially those the youth were involved in through community organizations, is an essential space for them to develop social awareness. (Harris & Kiyama, 2013). Fine et al. (2000) see these community spaces as physical and conceptual spaces that allow the young people to imagine what can be. Recent studies by Kiang (2001), Kwon (2013), and Quinn & Nguyen (2017) offer hope as they found that afterschool programming helps develop young people as civic actors.

Limitations and Parameters of Study

How the students began formulating thoughts on belonging aligns with previous migration and transdisciplinary scholarships defining belonging. However, this study offers critical contributions regards belonging for young people from refugee backgrounds because the voices of the young people are centered, and it gives a glimpse into how they think through the discourse of belonging. Following, both major strengths and weaknesses are discussed.

Strengths. While the research was not designed only to have Asian participants, recruiting participants from a Southeast Asian-focused community-based organization meant that most participants identified as Southeast Asian. Many of the students who participated in the Making Worcester Home project knew each other, they had similar experiences, therefore, were congruent in terms of viewpoints, beliefs, and opinions. This offered a richer data on the students' experiences, since the focus of the study was on students in the MWH project and not belonging among newcomer's city wide.

Limitations. The first is that inconsistent demographic data was collected between the two cohorts, which meant that I was unable to do a deeper analysis of the

data. The sample size was small and not representative of race, gender, ethnicity, or immigration status. It would have been helpful to go back and capture the participants' demographic information and hold focus groups to see how the YPAR project impacted their thoughts on belonging and social activism; however, limitations with making successful contact with most of the participants prevented that from happening.

Although the students' original words are used in the study's findings, there were times I needed to interpret what the students were saying since their conversations were not specifically about belonging. There were delays in getting parts of the data set due to permission issues from Worcester University, which created delays in analyzing data and the project. Since the study was exploratory and for a master's degree requirement, as well as being conducted during the COVID-19 and while I was living in another state from where the participants were based, I only had a short window of time to complete it, which did not allow for more robust efforts to contact the participants for focus groups and 1:1 interview. While their YPAR projects had a social and racial justice focus, many students were unfamiliar with critical racial justice concepts and terms and were not exposed to activism. The students viewed the project for its educational value, which contributed to the failure of both groups to undertake the action part of their research. Much of the class time was spent providing education around social and racial justice activism. The cohorts were not gender-balanced or balanced regarding the students' immigration backgrounds.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

In this paper, I examined how students in a YPAR project Making Worcester Home, were formulating thoughts on belonging. The research distilled definitions of belonging by analyzing the students' writings and discussions. From a review of existing migration and transdisciplinary literature, a sense of belonging conceptualization of belonging can be summed up as social belonging and social inclusion. From the study's findings, I offer five intersecting themes which I consider central to how the participants were thinking about and conceptualizing a sense of belonging:

- 1) spatial belonging – relationship to place, privileges, safety, inclusion, and exclusion within geographic spaces.
- 2) Intersectionality and social location – focused on how intersectional identities impact inclusion and exclusion within group settings.
- 3) Boundaries - inclusion and exclusion - strategies to exclude, including social identities reconstruction.
- 4) Dual identity – belonging based on ethnicity and cultural acceptance.
- 5) Feeling supported and well resourced
- 6) Belonging through activism and community change.

From our findings and the literature review, a sense of belonging is very subjective and based on feelings of respect and reciprocal relationships that are always in flux, and it is a process of becoming instead of arrival. Feelings of connectedness are

central to belonging and are contextual and controlled through boundaries to belonging set by the dominant powers. Belonging is dynamic and fluid and can be associated with multiple identities. Belonging for the young people from refugee backgrounds emerged as they discussed access to resources, school funding, hate crimes, and intergenerational bias and hate, they articulated that belonging was wrapped up in intersectional identities and social locations. I put the students' conceptualization of belonging in conversation with existing scholarship on newcomer and refugee belonging; there is congruence between the two. However, the students were also thinking about belonging as associated with support and access to resources, which are not common ways of looking at belonging within existing scholarships. This research was part of more extensive action research, thoughts on belonging emerged as the students formulated plans for activism and community change. From their discussion, I distilled the beginning thought of how activism and spaces of community change contribute to belonging.

Implications

Given challenges with recruiting young people from refugee backgrounds, limitations with data collection, and having two cohorts of the program, I would encourage a longitudinal approach for future studies on this topic with pre and post-tests to determine the youths' knowledge of belonging and activism. After completing the course, follow-up studies should engage the students to determine its impact on their thoughts of belonging and social change. These initial findings from this study and a planned academic peer-review journal article between myself and the co-researchers will add to the scholarship of refugee youth engagement. Public-facing events to show the

Making Worcester Home project results could also engage other young people from refugee backgrounds, build trust, and establish long-term relationships with refugee-serving community-based organizations. This study provides the groundwork for future research.

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