

Movement, identity and belonging among refugee-background young people in Aotearoa New Zealand



A qualitative study of Afghan, Somali and Colombian young people in the Waikato by Lot Hawkins, Strategic Insights and Data Manager, Sport Waikato

Abstract

Sport Waikato undertook a qualitative study after Hamilton Boys' High School identified an apparent gap between the proportion of students from migrant backgrounds within the school and the proportion represented in the Moving Waikato Youth Survey. The study explored how refugee-background young people experience movement, physical activity, identity and belonging, and how family, faith, culture, language, gender and everyday circumstances shape participation. Sport Waikato worked with Hamilton Boys' High School, Hillcrest High School and the Refugee Orientation Centre. The study involved Afghan, Somali and Colombian students and used focus groups and individual interviews. Participants described movement as embedded in wider experiences of home, family, faith, friendship, culture and settlement. The findings highlight the importance of family trust, culturally and religiously appropriate participation conditions, informal play, social connection, and practical details such as clothing, food, privacy and communication. Participants also described New Zealand as offering safety and opportunity while sometimes lacking the familiarity, social ease and spontaneous play associated with home. The paper argues that integration should not be understood as assimilation into existing activity systems. Rather, participation environments may need to adapt so that young people can engage without setting aside important parts of their identity. The study is not representative of entire Afghan, Somali or Colombian communities; it identifies patterns, tensions and possibilities within the participants' accounts.

Keywords: refugee-background young people; movement; physical activity; belonging; integration; culture; family; faith; play; Aotearoa New Zealand

1. Introduction

Every 18–24 months, Sport Waikato runs the Moving Waikato Youth Survey across secondary schools in the greater Waikato region. The survey is used to understand how young people experience movement, physical activity and the environments around them. The present study emerged after Hamilton Boys' High School observed that around 6% of survey respondents appeared to come from migrant backgrounds, while the proportion within the school was closer to 25%. This raised a question about whose experiences were absent from the data and, consequently, from decisions informed by those data.

The study began with recognition that migration is not a single experience. Some families choose to relocate to New Zealand, some young people arrive for educational opportunities, and others seek safety after being forced to leave home. These pathways can shape identity, belonging, family life and relationships with movement in different ways. Sport Waikato also identified a gap in its own understanding of how young people from non-Western cultural backgrounds experience physical activity and what movement means within their families and communities.

Much organised physical activity in New Zealand is structured through teams, registrations, scheduled training, uniforms, fees and competition. These arrangements may work well for many young people, but the study questioned whether they are culturally neutral. It therefore asked how different cultures understand movement, what makes activity spaces feel welcoming and safe, what roles are played by family, faith, language, food, gender, community and cultural identity, and what might need to change in the systems surrounding young people.

The study focused initially on refugee-background young people, whose perspectives were considered less visible within mainstream survey data. Afghan, Somali and Colombian young people were included. The purpose was not to define participants through displacement, but to understand how movement fitted within the wider context of their lives.

2. Conceptual and research context

2.1 Integration, assimilation and belonging

A central framing within the study is the distinction between integration and assimilation. Assimilation is understood as requiring young people to fit an existing system by setting aside aspects of culture and identity. Integration, by contrast, is treated as a two-way process in which young people participate in the wider life of Aotearoa while schools, clubs and activity providers make room for the languages, faith, family relationships, clothing, food, play and cultural meanings they bring. Berry's (1997) acculturation framework similarly distinguishes integration from assimilation by recognising that connection to heritage culture and participation in wider society can coexist.

This framing is relevant to the accounts in the present study because culture was described not as an additional feature of identity but as part of how young people understood home, family, belonging and participation. Social Identity Theory identifies group memberships such as ethnicity, religion, language and nationality as contributors to self-concept (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), while cultural psychology recognises that the self may be deeply relational and connected to family and community (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Self-Determination Theory provides a further lens through relatedness, competence and autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Within the participants' accounts, these dimensions were visible in the importance of belonging, understanding the social codes of activity spaces, and being able to participate without concealing or abandoning aspects of identity.

2.2 Physical activity, culture and settlement

Previous work cited in the study indicates that culturally inclusive sport and active recreation depend on more than an open invitation. Ahmad and Thorpe (2020) emphasise practical attention to modesty, gender, food, family and the social environment. Block and Gibbs (2017) similarly identify the importance of communication with families and the role of bicultural workers or community liaison functions in supporting participation for refugee-background young people. Nunn, Spaaij and Luguetti (2022) challenge a narrow view of sport as a mechanism for absorbing refugee-background young people into a receiving society, instead describing football as a mobile and transnational sphere of belonging.

The wider evidence also supports attention to informal play and to broader meanings of physical activity. Play contributes to cognitive, physical, social and emotional development and relationships (Ginsburg et al., 2007; Lester & Russell, 2010; Yogman et al., 2018). Rio and Saligan (2023) argue for understanding physical activity through cultural and contextual meaning, while Edwards et al. (2017) conceptualise physical literacy through motivation, confidence, competence, knowledge and valuing movement across the life course. Walters et al. (2022) call for culture change in youth sport where adult and system behaviours narrow young people's experiences.

3. Methods

3.1 Study setting and partners

Sport Waikato worked with Hamilton Boys' High School, Hillcrest High School and the Refugee Orientation Centre (ROC). The research took place in May and June 2026. Young people were met at school in settings intended to be familiar to them.

3.2 Participants

The study included Afghan, Somali and Colombian students. . We spoke to 18 Afghan students (4 females, 14 males), 9 Somali students (2 females, 6 males) and 6 Colombian students (3 females and 4 males). We also spoke some Afghan and Somali adults to check in on how they viewed activity in New Zealand for their youth

3.3 Data collection

A qualitative approach was used to hear directly from young people in their own words. Insights were generated through a combination of focus groups and individual interviews conducted at school. The focus was understanding how their culture shapes their views on movement and how the can be heard better to help further integration into New Zealand. Each of the focus groups was between 30-75 minutes long and a battery of questions, from direct to emotive were used to analyse insights.

Being a qualitative research this study can be seen as a close listening exercise rather than a representative account of Afghan, Somali or Colombian communities. The findings identify patterns, tensions and possibilities within the conversations and are not intended to be treated as fixed truths about any culture.

4. Findings

4.1 Culture, home and continuity

Across the three ethnic groups, participants described home through family, faith, language, food, hospitality and social practices. Colombian participants referred to foods such as hot chocolate with cheese, bocadillo and patacones, as well as music, dance, clothing and shared lunches. Somali participants described Islamic greetings, removing shoes at the door, tea and food for visitors, Somali language, rice and meat, dance, Islamic calligraphy, oud and incense, prayer and modesty. Afghan participants spoke about Persian rugs, the smell of food, sitting on the floor for meals, tea, family gatherings, large households, faith and respect for parents and elders.

“For music and dance... Spanish day... it’s the only day that we get to do that kind of stuff.”
(HHS, Year 13, female)

These accounts show that cultural identity was carried into everyday life through ordinary practices and relationships. Participants also described identity as something negotiated in the present rather than preserved unchanged from the country of origin. One Afghan participant, for example, described wanting to carry respect for elders into life in New Zealand.

“We’ve got respect for elders... we need to bring that respect... over to the Kiwi side.”
(Afghan, male)

Across the groups, the recurring issue was not a single cultural object or practice but the experience of being welcomed, recognised and treated as though one belongs. A Colombian participant described New Zealand as noticeably quieter than Colombia, linking the difference to the social atmosphere around everyday life.

“It’s really quiet here. In Colombia, they blast music... but here it’s really quiet. Too quiet.”
(HHS, Year 13, female)

4.2 Faith and the conditions of participation

For many Afghan and Somali participants, Islam was woven through everyday life. Participants referred to Islamic greetings, prayer, Ramadan, Qur’an lessons, modesty, hospitality and respect for guests. Faith did not emerge as a simple explanation for lower participation. Instead, it shaped the conditions under which participation felt appropriate through clothing, mixed-gender participation, food, privacy, prayer and the cultural and religious comfort of an environment.

Participants also distinguished between religion and culture. Somali girls, for example, described expectations about girls playing outside after a certain age as ‘more just Somali culture’, noting that religious families do not all respond in the same way. The study therefore cautions against treating every participation issue as a religious barrier, as family values, cultural norms, faith and individual preference may overlap without being identical.

“People might think like I’m a Muslim, I do this, that, that, that. I’m just a simple person. I’m like you basically.” (Somali boy, Year 10)

Food provided a practical example of how apparently small design decisions could influence whether participants felt expected in an activity space. Muslim students described needing to check whether half-time lollies contained gelatin. Similar practical considerations included modest or hijab-compatible clothing, private changing areas, prayer-aware facilities, language support and halal food.

4.3 Movement as a setting for belonging

Participants’ accounts positioned physical activity as more than exercise or sport participation. Movement was associated with belonging, identity, safety, confidence, family trust, cultural continuity and the possibility of bringing different parts of the self into one setting. Decisions about participation could involve home culture, school culture, faith, language, gender expectations, friendship, memories of another country and the opportunities available in New Zealand.

“It feels like home. It feels like we’re supposed to be here.” (HBHS, Somali boy, Year 10)

Within this framing, integration is not achieved simply by inviting young people into an unchanged system. The study argues that activity environments may themselves need to change in response to who is present. Practical conditions such as female-only spaces where needed, modest and warm clothing, halal food, family inclusion, welcoming staff, social trial sessions, prayer-aware facilities and alternatives to standard food rewards were identified as relevant to trust and participation.

4.4 Participation decisions occur within everyday life

Participants described activity decisions as occurring within already complex days. Before reaching a field, court or gym, a young person may be navigating school workload, tiredness, transport, language, prayer, family responsibilities, parental permission, clothing, food, friendship and concern about being judged or misunderstood.

“At the end of the day, I’m human. I’m not supposed to live to your expectations... Getting people to realise there’s other things going on outside of what’s happening on the field to impact what’s going on.” (Somali boy, Year 10)

From this perspective, a response such as being ‘too busy’ may reflect a wider set of pressures and permissions rather than a single preference. Participation is therefore better understood in context than as an isolated individual decision.

4.5 Family as a trust system

Family emerged as a major influence on whether participation felt possible. Participants described a contrast between more individualised decision-making in New Zealand and more family-led decision-making within their own communities. For some young people, choices were made with family rather than independently of family.

“In NZ kids have got the final say. Yet in our culture our parents have the final say.” (HHS, Afghan girl, Year 10)

Parents could shape participation through concerns about safety, injury, gender expectations, time, study priorities, transport and cultural values. These dynamics were especially visible in accounts concerning girls. Adult Afghan discussions included stronger reservations about strenuous or mixed-gender activity for girls, including modesty, bodily safety and family reputation. Somali participants also described gender expectations, while some expressed openness to girls trying a wider range of activities in New Zealand. The study emphasises variation within each community and does not present these accounts as fixed rules.

Family attendance and involvement also varied. Participants cited a wanting their parents to watch him play even though the parents did not see their attendance as a useful use of their time. The study notes that parental attendance may be affected by work and family demands, transport, language, unfamiliarity with the sport system or different expectations about the role parents play.

“My parents say it’s a waste of their time to come and watch me. But I would be happy if they did come!” (HBHS, Year 12)

Taken together, the accounts suggest that where families do not understand or trust an activity, the activity may remain unavailable in practice even when it is technically open. Family is therefore presented as a relationship to build with rather than an obstacle to work around.

4.6 Opportunity in New Zealand and familiarity with home

When participants described New Zealand, opportunity was a recurring theme. Young people referred to opportunities in education, healthcare, safety, laws and greater possibility for girls and women. At the same time, safety and opportunity did not automatically make New Zealand feel like home. Places of origin were also remembered through family, childhood, food, language, music, friendship, hospitality and the ease of being understood.

“Women can do everything they want. They can work, study... basically, they can do everything they want.” (HHS, Afghan girl, Year 12)

“The first thing you’re going to get is tea and snacks and food... for guests, we act like they’re our family.” (HBHS, Afghan boy, Year 12)

Participants' accounts therefore resisted a simple movement from 'less' to 'more' after settlement. Young people could gain safety and possibility while also experiencing loss of language, family proximity, cultural rhythm and social ease.

"My parents want to go back to Colombia because it's not the same... it's hard to make friends for them and then they just miss talking to people that talk the same language."
(HHS, Year 11, female)

4.7 Formal opportunity does not automatically create informal play

A recurring contrast concerned the availability of organised activity and the loss of spontaneous play. Participants described New Zealand as having safer spaces, better facilities and more organised sport, while also reporting less informal activity that simply happens among neighbours and friends.

"In Afghanistan, people spend time playing with each other but in New Zealand people spend time on their phone." (HHS, Afghan boy, Year 10)

"There's not people playing... there's not like free play." (HHS, Somali boy)

"Go home and play on the streets... tag... hide and seek." (HHS, Colombian male, Year 10)
Afghan boy, Year 12)

Somali girls described creating football goals from rocks, illustrating how play can emerge from whatever people, space, time and materials are available. These accounts support attention to forms of movement that sit outside organised clubs, formal teams and structured pathways.

4.8 Activity as a social and cultural practice

Participants frequently described activity through fun, friendship, freedom and doing something together. Activity was connected with language, humour, food, music, faith, community and memory rather than being discussed only through health, fitness or performance.

"We have chemistry because we've been friends for a long time... we communicate in Spanish... we understand each other." (Colombian boy, Year 11)

"Football and futsal is one of the things that I like to express myself... forget about what is going on... get my head out of the world." (HBHS, Somali boy, Year 10)

The adult conversations added references to sensory and social losses surrounding settlement, including reduced access to language, festivals, familiar food, warm weather, clothing, music and large family gatherings. Within the study, these connections are treated as part of the activity experience rather than decorative additions to it.

4.9 Confidence, progress and possible future selves

Young people also described movement as a setting in which they could experience competence, progress, motivation and possible future identities. This was consistent with the study's use of Self-Determination Theory, self-efficacy and possible-selves theory (Bandura, 1977; Markus & Nurius, 1986; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

“It makes me feel like I’m trying hard... determined... it gives me motivation. The more I do it, the more I see progress, the more I want to do it.” (HBHS, Colombian boy, Year 11)

The accounts also included smaller forms of aspiration. One Somali girl described wanting to ‘try more stuff’ and ‘go out more’, while another wanted to join volleyball but found the team was full. The study links these accounts to the role schools and adults can play in supporting belonging and future opportunity (Anderson et al., 2023).

4.10 Assumptions within New Zealand activity culture

The interviews identified several assumptions that may shape activity design: that ‘real’ activity must involve sweat, endurance, power, hard training or formal competition; that a club is the natural destination; that young people make decisions independently; and that mixed-gender spaces, short uniforms, English-only information and standard snacks are neutral. Participants’ accounts suggest that these assumptions do not operate neutrally for every family.

The study therefore argues for recognising movement that may be social, light, skill-based, modest, rhythmic, playful, tactical, family-based or low-contact as meaningful activity in its own right. This is consistent with the broader physical literacy and cultural-contextual perspectives cited in the study (Edwards et al., 2017; Rio & Saligan, 2023).

4.11 Activity preferences and a working hypothesis

Afghan and Somali students expressed interest in volleyball and badminton. The study explicitly treats the reasons for these preferences as a working hypothesis rather than a conclusion. Possible explanations identified in the research material include lower-contact or court-based settings, clothing flexibility, friendship groups, familiarity, availability and enjoyment. Boys also spoke about football, volleyball, basketball and badminton, while girls expressed interest in volleyball and clearer information about after-school opportunities.

“I wanted to join the volleyball... I love it.” (HHS, Somali girl, Year 10)

Regional secondary-school data cited in the study show that volleyball participation increased by 29% between 2021 and 2025, compared with increases of 11% for hockey, 9% for football and netball, 4% for basketball, and a 3% decline in rugby (NZSSSC Waikato 2021–2025). These data do not establish why any cultural group chooses volleyball, but they provide context for further testing of the hypothesis.

The study therefore reframes the question away from deciding which sport should be offered to a particular group and toward understanding what makes forms of movement feel socially safe, culturally comfortable, enjoyable and worth returning to.

5. Discussion

5.1 Integration requires movement from the system as well as the participant

The findings support the study's distinction between integration and assimilation. Participants described wanting to participate without becoming less connected to culture, faith, family or language. In this context, access to an unchanged activity environment is not equivalent to integration. The practical conditions of participation—such as gender arrangements, clothing, food, language, prayer, privacy and family communication—can determine whether an opportunity is usable in practice.

This interpretation aligns with Ahmad and Thorpe's (2020) emphasis on practical cultural inclusion and with Block and Gibbs' (2017) focus on family communication and bicultural support. It also reflects Nunn et al.'s (2022) argument that refugee-background young people bring movement cultures, meanings and memories with them rather than arriving as empty recipients of the host society's sport system.

5.2 Belonging, family trust and participation are intertwined

The findings also show that participation may be negotiated through relationships rather than decided solely by the individual young person. Family trust, safety, gender expectations, study priorities, transport and cultural values were interwoven with whether activity felt possible. This was particularly visible in accounts concerning girls, but the study also records variation within communities and cautions against treating any account as universally representative.

The central practical implication is that providers may need to design not only for the young person but also for the trust network around them. The study describes trust as something built through clear information, familiar people, appropriate clothing and food, practical arrangements and the quality of the first experience.

5.3 Informal play deserves attention alongside formal participation

The contrast between extensive formal opportunity and reduced spontaneous play is one of the clearest tensions in the interviews. Participants described missing street play, neighbourhood activity, cultural games and the ability to create play from simple materials. These accounts support the argument that participation measures focused only on clubs, teams and structured pathways may overlook forms of movement that matter to young people.

The study does not reject organised sport. Rather, it suggests that the first step into movement need not always require registration, uniforms, travel and competition. Open spaces, cultural games, informal tournaments, accessible school grounds and supervised but not over-controlled play are proposed as ways to test how informal movement can be supported.

5.4 Cultural specificity and variation

The study contains both recurring themes across groups and issues that were more prominent within particular participant accounts. Food, family, language and social connection appeared across the three groups, while prayer, halal food, modest clothing and gender arrangements were particularly prominent within Afghan and Somali accounts. The study also records variation within communities, including differences in how participants described religion, culture and expectations for girls. These findings should therefore be read as situated accounts rather than fixed cultural profiles.

6. Implications for practice

The research identifies a series of practical implications for schools, clubs, activity providers and other organisations designing movement opportunities for refugee-background young people. These implications are presented as areas for adaptation, co-design and testing rather than as a single programme model.

- Create recurring opportunities that allow social connection, informal play and structured activity to coexist.
- Provide low-barrier opportunities for free play, including open courts, school-yard access, cultural games and informal tournaments.
- Build family trust through clear information about supervision, safety, gender mix, clothing, transport, cost, timing and the value of participation.
- Use trusted community connections and, where possible, home-language communication rather than relying only on translated written material.
- Design first experiences so young people know where to go, who will greet them, what will happen, what they can wear, whether they may bring a friend or sibling and what participation will cost.
- Make practical cultural considerations operational, including modest clothing, gender and privacy needs, prayer space, food requirements, transport, cost, photography, racism response, language and family communication.
- Support coaches, teachers, volunteers and facility staff to respond practically to cultural and participation issues rather than relying on general cultural awareness alone.
- Measure more than attendance by considering repeat participation, felt belonging, parent trust, whether cultural needs were met, whether informal play increased and whether providers changed their practice in response to community input.

The study also proposes co-design and pilot activity to test which changes matter most. It identifies possibilities such as female-only spaces, modest kit, halal food, home-language communication, reduced travel, family attendance, trial-first sessions and trusted community champions, while explicitly cautioning against assuming which barrier or design feature is most important for a particular group

7. Limitations

The study is not intended to be representative of Afghan, Somali or Colombian communities. The findings should therefore be interpreted as patterns, tensions and possibilities within the conversations rather than as claims about entire communities.

The study also identifies hypotheses that require further testing. In particular, the reasons behind interest in volleyball and badminton are not established by the current data, and regional participation trends do not explain cultural preferences. The research material itself states that these explanations should not be decided for participants.

8. Conclusion

This study began with the question of what is missed when refugee-background young people are not adequately heard in data about movement and physical activity. The findings suggest that what is missed is not simply a set of participation numbers but a fuller understanding of how movement is embedded within identity, family, faith, culture, friendship, safety, opportunity and belonging.

For the Afghan, Somali and Colombian young people in this study, physical activity could be a place to connect, express culture, regulate emotion, build confidence and remain connected to home while building a life in Aotearoa. Participation was not always an individual choice made in isolation; it was negotiated through relationships, trust and the practical details of everyday life.

The study's central implication is that integration should not require young people to set aside parts of themselves in order to participate. Movement environments may need to adapt to the people who enter them. This means paying attention not only to whether an opportunity is technically available, but to whether young people and their families can recognise, trust and use it in practice. The appropriate next step is not to assume the answer for communities, but to continue listening, co-designing and testing how movement environments can support meaningful, sustained and culturally safe participation.

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