PROMOTING LANGUAGE, LITERACY AND WELL-BEING OF SYRIAN REFUGEE CHILDREN THROUGH SUMMER CAMPS

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This paper describes the activities carried out in the H.appi summer camps established for Syrian refugee children and discusses the benefits of these camps on language, literacy and well-being for the refugee population. The success of the summer camps has implications on effective policies and practices for the refugee population.

Cet article décrit les activités menées dans les camps d'été pour les réfugiés syriens et les avantages de ces camps en ce qui a trait à la langue, l'alphabétisation et le bien-être de la population réfugiée. Le succès des camps d'été a des répercussions sur les politiques et les pratiques efficaces pour la population réfugiée.

Refugee children have specific needs relating to their language development and mental health. Effective policies and practices that are specifically tailored to this population must be examined and executed. This means that the key to integrating refugee children and youth into Canadian communities is to offer a safe, supportive, inclusive, and intellectually stimulating space for learning. We will examine the factors that facilitate integration through the lens of a unique summer camp for refugees called H.appi (2017).

LANGUAGE, LEARNING AND WELL-BEING

In order to fully participate in Canadian society, refugee children need to achieve fluent language and literacy skills in an official language, which is English in the context of the Greater Toronto Area (GTA). English language and literacy skills increase the integration into Canadian culture and improve academic performance educational and career prospects. At the same time, maintenance and development of

children's first language is key to healthy family relationships, group cohesion and personal identity, and may confer cognitive advantages associated with bilingualism.

Refugees are at a higher risk of mental health problems compared to the general population and non-refugee migrants. Stressors that impact many Canadian refugee children include emotional stress due to parents' socio-economic conditions, violence and neglect from school administrators, teachers and parents, as well as gender-based violence in the family. Further, many refugee youth fear of further relocation, being kidnapped, and sexually harassed. Such stressors significantly impact their overall mental and emotional wellbeing. Many refugees come from areas in the world where mental health problems are highly stigmatized, Therefore, mental health problems become internalized and act as a barrier for refugees to seek help.

THE H.APPI CAMP

The H.appi camp is a month-long summer camp program for refugee children and youth who are left "furthest behind". The goals of the camp are to help integrate refugees into Canadian communities, improve their literacy and English language skills, and improve their quality of life by ameliorating their emotional and mental health. What distinguishes this summer camp is that it is designed to be culturally sensitive and meet the specific needs of refugee children and youth.

The H.appi Camp was first piloted in the summer of 2016 in Toronto, Ontario, and it registered 81 Syrian refugee children at no cost to families. The fairly homogenous cultural and language background of the children were selected to ensure that the children felt safe in a familiar and inclusive environment. The camp councillors carried out reflective activities to promote language and literacy skills, as well as to improve mental and emotional wellbeing. Camp councillors were bilingual in English and Arabic, which allowed them to effectively communicate with all campers.

Following the camp's success in Toronto in 2016, H.appi's efforts expanded to London, Ontario. In 2017, the H.appi camp hosted 200 children across the two Canadian cities and opened its doors to Canadian refugees from many different countries of origin. The program consisted of physical activities, creative arts, and theatre. Further, focused thematic activities were designed and administered that aimed at building core competencies in the individual, group, and the community. For example, a thematic activity that focused on building key individual and group competency was called "Stand-Up and Be Heard". This activity focused on building self-esteem in campers by teaching participants how to effectively communicate their thoughts and feelings to their peers. These thematic activities were continuously revised based on feedback from the campers. For instance, cigarette smoking among youth became a growing concern to many refugee families. Among the children that attended in 2016, six returned in 2017 that self-identified as regular smokers. In response to this concern, we developed focused group activities that explored issues relating to smoking and engaged the youth in group discussion on mental health and wellbeing. Of the six children, five ceased smoking by the end of the camp, while the sixth decreased the amount smoked with the goal of complete cessation in the future.

Empowerment was an additional goal that was added to the 2017 camp to encourage children to become active leaders in their communities. The empowerment workshop, the "I AM" project, was created and implemented by a partnering local charity — Jayu. The program focused on campers between the ages of 12 and 15 years of age. Its goals were to help the campers tell their stories through the lens of a camera, while also engaging in critical and creative thinking on the meaning of home and freedom. Their stories were audio recorded and their photographs were displayed in galleries across Toronto (Jayu 2017).

The camp experience had tremendous impact on campers and their families, as well, on the H.appi staff. Through various blogs, camp councillors expressed the long-lasting impact that the camp has had on their professional and personal development. Understanding the importance of empathy and compassion was a common theme at H.appi's debriefing sessions.

BRIDGING THE GAP IN LANGUAGE AND LITERACY

Bridging the gap between two different cultures and enhancing the English proficiency of refugee youth were important objectives of the H.appi summer camp. Daily literacy sessions within the regular summer camp days were designed by a team from the Multilingualism and Literacy lab (Chen, 2017) at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) at the University of Toronto. These literacy sessions gave the camp participants the confidence to excel in their new English Canadian schools and reduced the negative effects of the "summer slide".

The literacy sessions were designed to cover themes and concepts important for newcomers to Canada. The themes included recreational activities in summer, snow and the winter season, popular sports and the food variety in Canada. Specific classes were prepared with all necessary equipment to welcome these children. A new theme was introduced to the students each week.

The instructors asked the camp participants to brainstorm on each topic, taught them the vocabulary used to describe the activities, and asked them to write sentences and essays

in their notebooks. Each theme was also supported by worksheets created to suit the needs and interests of the different age groups. Children were always eager to share their own thoughts on each theme. They described similarities as well as differences between what they had back home and what they were experiencing in their new country.

Unfortunately, many refugee children had little if any formal schooling before arriving in Canada. As a result, it was challenging for literacy instructors to address different literacy levels within each age group. Assessing English literacy levels of refugee children before the camp started helped instructors meet their needs.

SUPPORTING AND CREATING CHANGE

Early life experiences impact children's development and future health outcomes. As a society, we need to move past acknowledging the need for support and focus on creating change. Many children and youth need their community's help in forging a new path for success. These positive experiences help build the foundation for refugee children and youth to flourish in their new environments. The success of H.appi emphasizes the importance of cross-sectoral collaboration to create, execute, and evaluate effective community programs and interventions. Through the work at H.appi, research and community service was combined to ensure that programming targets real issues at the individual, group, and community levels.

In light of our experience at the H.appi camp, future work will continually bridge research with community service. The overarching aim of our work is to integrate the H.appi camp into local and international communities to positively impact the development of marginalized children. Only through collaboration and innovation can we ensure that no child is left behind, and that every child is, simply, H.appi.

REFERENCES

Chen, X. Multilingualism and Literacy Lab. www.oise.utoronto.ca/chenlab (accessed September 29, 2017)

H.appi. www.h-appi.org (accessed September 29, 2017)