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BUILDING ON BEST PRACTICES AND ORGANIZATIONAL EXPERTISE: INFORMING
CURRICULUM DESIGN FOR REFUGEE AND ASYLUM-SEEKING YOUTH AT
PHILADELPHIA OUTWARD BOUND SCHOOL

Emily Della Fera

PIM80 ISLR

A Capstone Paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Master of
Intercultural Service, Leadership, and Management degree at SIT Graduate Institute in
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List of Abbreviations

CRRF - Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework

ESL – English as a Second Language

GCM – Global Compact for Migration

GRC – Global Refugee Compact

HIAS – Hebrew Immigration Aid Society

ISP – Individualized Student Plan

NSC – Nationalities Service Center

POBS – Philadelphia Outward Bound School

PTSD – Post-traumatic Stress Disorder

REACH – Refugee Education and Adventure Challenge

UNHCR – United Nations High Commission for Refugees

VPG – Vertical Play Gym

Abstract

Refugee and asylum-seeking youth experience a variety of barriers within education, social adjustment and inclusion, and mental and physical health when resettling to a new country. These barriers which can be mitigated with outdoor education programs that supplement existing resettlement programs. Outdoor education has proven positive outcomes in youth's self-perception and confidence, school performance, community and relationship building, and physical and mental health. This course-linked capstone designs curriculum for an outdoor education program that will be proposed to the Philadelphia Outward Bound School. Designed specifically for refugee and asylum-seeking youth, the curriculum fosters environments for participants to build relationships, gain confidence, and learn skills that will serve them during their resettlement experience. Rooted in frameworks, theories, and current best practices, the curriculum combines ground initiatives and high-ropes and adventure activities that build participants' capacities to trust each other, work together, communicate, and connect with their peers and interact with their new environment. The proposed curriculum can be used in partnership with current resettlement programs to strengthen services offered to refugee and asylum-seeking youth, and can also lead to further, more in-depth opportunities for participants to adjust to life in Philadelphia.

Keywords: refugee youth, asylum-seekers, outdoor education, experiential education, resilience, trauma-informed education

Introduction

Having to flee your home due to conflict or persecution can be difficult to imagine, but for many people, it is a modern-day reality. Yet the experience is not a recent phenomenon. Indeed, as a result of World Wars I and II, millions of people were forced to flee their homes in search of safety, while others were relocated, deported, and resettled (UNHCR, 2011). In response, governments united and adopted the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. Article 1 of the 1951 Refugee Convention defines refugees as a person outside of their country of nationality or habitual residence who has a well-founded fear of persecution because of race, religion, nationality, or social or political affiliation that cannot rely on the protection of that country from said persecution (United Nations General Assembly, 1951). Refugees are resettled to host countries through humanitarian and government programs. Asylum-seekers are those that have left their country seeking protection from persecution and human rights violations, but who are not yet legally recognized as refugees (Phillips, 2011). This differs from migrants, or people who move voluntarily to another country for a variety of reasons. Although migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers are entitled to the same human rights and fundamental freedoms as outlined in the Global Compact for Migration (GCM), they are distinct groups governed by different legal frameworks (United Nations General Assembly, 2018). The GCM was established in 2018. It is the first global agreement that establishes a common approach to international migration in all dimensions. It builds on the 1951 Convention and its 1967 Protocol by creating 23 objectives to better manage migration at the local, national, regional, and global levels (United Nations General Assembly, 2018).

The Refugee Experience

The experience of being a refugee or asylum seeker can be very difficult, particularly for youth. At school, refugee children can encounter a myriad of challenges to their healthy adaptation and development, including acculturation stress, language barriers, distrust of school personnel, limited financial resources, and in some cases, separation from family (Reynolds & Bacon, 2018). Lack of funding and substantial supports as well as ideological constraints at local and national levels result in inadequate resources and systems to integrate and educate newcomer youth (Biasutti & Concina, 2021; Szlyk et al., 2020). In addition to challenges presented by the education system, students may have to overcome social-emotional barriers, like managing peer influences and identity struggles while attempting to navigate a new school system in a language they do not fully dominate (Evans et al., 2022). Given that school is a primary avenue for refugee students to integrate into society, these barriers may inhibit their ability to adapt and may lead to relevant mental health complications.

It is not uncommon for refugee children to have experienced trauma prior to or during their migration. Many minors seeking asylum or refuge have witnessed physical or verbal violence to a family member (Sangmo et al., 2020). Consequently, children can develop, "posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety and depression, maladaptive grief, social withdrawal, and behavioral and academic difficulties" (Reynolds & Bacon, 2018, p. 746). Depending on the situation, such debilitating mental health challenges can be compounded by the loss of loved ones, deprivation, and displacement (Cleary et al., 2018).

Refugee Resettlement in the United States

Although the United States has historically been a world leader in refugee resettlement, resettlement rates have decreased in the country over the past five years (National Immigration

Forum, 2020). Of the 26.4 million refugees and 4.2 million asylum-seekers that the UN reported were forcibly displaced in 2020, 11,840 people were admitted as refugees and 31,429 were granted asylum to the U.S. (Baugh, 2022; UNHCR, 2021). In 2020, the US Department of State signed the Framework for Cooperation with the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) outlining their commitment to supporting refugee and asylum-seeking communities. The U.S.'s commitment has translated to federally funded programs at the state level. For example, the Pennsylvania Department of Education hosts the Refugee Education Program, which "aims to integrate and assimilate refugee students into the public school system" (PA Department of Human Services, n.d.).

Refugee Resettlement Programs

Immigrant organizations offer a variety of programs for refugee and asylum-seeking youth to help them overcome some of the challenges that they face during resettlement. Some provide educational support, social services, and language classes, while others incorporate other services that seek to benefit youth. For example, the organization Refugee Education and Adventure Challenge (REACH) in Chicago "integrates experiential learning, positive youth development, ecotherapy, and outdoor education principles to inspire leadership, academic success, and connections among refugee youth" (REACH, 2019). In Jordan, The We Love Reading Project "offers children a fun but educational activity that puts them in contact with other children in a safe environment" (Alipui & Gerke, 2018, p.96). These are two examples of non-governmental programs that provide refugee children a space to have fun and build community while having overall positive benefits for their physical, social, and mental health.

Given REACH's proven success with outdoor education and refugee youth, I propose to design an adapted curriculum that will be proposed to the Philadelphia Outward Bound School

(POBS). Philadelphia is an ideal city to launch a new program for refugee youth given its status as a sanctuary city. A sanctuary city can be defined as “jurisdictions in which local law enforcement limits its cooperation with ICE in some way, most often by refusing to honor ICE-issued civil detainer requests” (Koenig, 2021, p. 100). The Pew Charitable Trust’s most recent report from 2018, stated that “in 2016, 794 refugees were resettled in Philadelphia, the highest number since at least 2002” (Ginsberg, 2018, p. 26). According to more recent data from the Department of Human Services of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia County consistently received the highest number of refugees each year of any county in the state of Pennsylvania with a total of 1,588 people over the last five years (PA Department of Human Services, n.d.). Despite Philadelphia’s status as a sanctuary city and the consistent arrival of refugees and asylum-seekers to the county, there is a paradoxical dearth of programming available for refugee and asylum-seeking children.

Philadelphia Outward Bound School

Why Outward Bound? Outward Bound is a leader in the outdoor education field. Founded by Kurt Hahn in 1941, Outward Bound delivers challenging outdoor learning programs with an emphasis on adventure and experiential learning with the goal of discovering and developing new skills and confidence through failure and success. The organization upholds their values of compassion, diversity, integrity, and excellence while encouraging students to challenge themselves and learn in new environments (Outward Bound USA, 2008). There are 11 Outward Bound schools across the U.S., including POBS, which has been operating since 1992. In that time, POBS has offered a variety of programs including day-programs and multi-day expeditions that use canoeing, rock climbing, backpacking, and high ropes challenges as tools for students to learn through challenge and adversity. During these adventure activities, instructors

incorporate curriculum to develop interpersonal, leadership, and character development skills for participants. In partnering with immigrant organizations that already have resettlement programs in place, POBS is well-positioned to offer immigrant children programs, spaces, and resources that can help them in the resettlement process.

Project Description

This course-linked capstone seeks to design curriculum to be proposed to an outdoor education program to supplement current resettlement programs that will encourage refugee and asylum-seeking youth to build relationships, gain confidence, and learn skills to help them resettle in their new environment. The curriculum design will be proposed to POBS in partnership with immigrant organizations in Philadelphia like Hebrew Immigration Aid Society (HIAS) and the Nationalities Service Center (NSC). The main goals of the program will be to support refugee youth in building community and relationships, and to become acquainted with Philadelphia, while learning new skills and practicing the English language. The curriculum will be developed based on best practices implemented by refugee organizations and proven benefits of outdoor education. I will adapt POBS's current curriculum to the specific needs of refugee and asylum-seeking youth so the participants will have the opportunity to learn new skills in a safe and supportive environment. The proposed program will be submitted for review, approval, and modification by trained specialists who specialize in working with refugee youth, before being implemented.

In this paper, I first provide a conceptual framework of key theories in working with refugees, experiential education, outdoor education, and youth development. The conceptual framework is used as the basis of curriculum planning for the program and is supplemented by a review of relevant literature on the content of successful programs and the benefits of outdoor

education. Included is a brief discussion of the research methodology and my positionality as a researcher after which I present my findings. These findings highlight best practices used in the field of refugee youth resettlement. Finally, I give a more detailed description of the curriculum and its goals and objectives, and a discussion of the implication of my findings and next steps.

Conceptual Framework

This program for refugee and asylum-seeking youth will be grounded in the following frameworks, theories, and approaches: The Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework, Resilience Theory, and Trauma-informed Care.

Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework

The Comprehensive Refugee Response Framework (CRRF) was developed in the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants at the Summit for Refugees and Migrants held by the United Nations General Assembly in September 2016. After two years of successful implementation in a dozen countries, it was adopted into the Global Refugee Compact (GRC). This framework provides a consistent multi-stakeholder approach for host countries to protect and assist refugees while still supporting local communities (United Nations General Assembly, 2016). Its major components present key elements to quickly admit displaced populations to the host country, support their immediate and ongoing needs, and attend to national and local institutions and communities that receive these populations (United Nations General Assembly, 2016). The goal of the CRRF is to provide sustainable support to both refugees and host communities by including refugees in the communities upon arrival and supporting their success. The CRRF promotes the self-reliance of refugees and host communities alike by creating mutual benefits and empowerment. For example, refugees contribute their unique skills or experiences

to local employers, who can use these skills to tap into new markets and improve their business (Nigusie & Carver, 2019).

Resilience Theory

Resilience theory focuses on “positive contextual, social, and individual variables that interfere with or disrupt developmental trajectories from risk to problem behaviors, mental distress and poor health outcomes” (Zimmerman, 2013, p. 381). In other words, resilience theory helps us to understand how people can grow and positively adapt despite overwhelming adversity. It goes hand in hand with persistence, adaptability, and transformability across multiple scales (Folke et al., 2010). There are three main models discussed within resiliency theory: compensatory, protective, and challenge (Zimmerman, 2013). The compensatory model states that positive influences and resources in a person’s life can neutralize or counteract risk exposure. The protective factor model protects youth from the negative effects of risk, for example, mentors safeguarding adolescent mothers against the damaging impacts of stress on their mental health. Lastly, the challenge model exposes youth to risk at modest levels so that they develop the coping mechanisms they need to overcome the negative effects of risk in the future (Zimmerman, 2013). Given refugees’ exposure to trauma, the challenge model will not be incorporated into this curriculum. When applied to the immigrant youth context, Resilience Theory focuses on the strengths of refugee youth as opposed to their vulnerabilities.

Trauma-informed care

Trauma-informed practices have become more common in education in recent years. The Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative (TLPI) has created a trauma-informed framework for schools to implement which help to create trauma-sensitive environments for students. The framework has six key actions: understanding the impact of trauma; supporting students to feel

physically, socially, emotionally, and academically safe; addressing student needs holistically; connecting students to school community; sharing responsibility among staff for all students; and anticipating and adapting to students' ever-changing needs (Cole et al., 2005; Jacobson, 2020). Trauma-informed or trauma-sensitive approaches invite schools to be mindful of how they interact with their students, shifting the mentality from "what is wrong with you" to "what happened to you" in order to create a safe space with the potential for growth within healing relationships (Jacobson, 2020). Miller et al. (2019) highlight the importance of providing trauma-informed care considering that it is "an approach that recognizes the impact of trauma on children's development and health and applies this knowledge of trauma and its consequences into practice, and actively seeks to prevent re-traumatization" (p. 2). Given that many refugee youth have experienced trauma before, during, or after their migration, using trauma-informed approaches with refugee and asylum-seeking youth can create a safe space for them to form strong, trusting relationships.

Literature Review

Studies related to the refugee youth resettlement have identified challenges and barriers in three major areas: education, social adjustment and inclusion, and health.

Barriers to Youth Resettlement

Education

Refugee and asylum-seeking youth can experience many challenges when adapting to a new education system. The language barrier is proven to be one of the most important challenges students face (Vigil & Lopez, 2020). Although many schools offer support for newcomer students, mainly in the form of English as a Second Language (ESL) classes, students are still expected to participate in other subjects and take standardized tests in English before they have

full domain of the language (Evans et al., 2022). Students' prior academic history also contributes to limited participation in classes. Refugees and asylum seekers come from different education systems and often experience a lapse in education because of the migration process. Szlyk et al. (2020) found that "many school districts do not have formal policies for placing students who are below age-appropriate grade level and who do not have transcripts or formal academic experience" (p. 8). Furthermore, schools that simply provide ESL support do not take into consideration those students who are not literate (Evans et al., 2022).

Another barrier to refugee youth education involves parents' ability to be involved. Parents' unfamiliarity with the educational system, cultural differences, limited transportation, inflexible schedules, and the language barrier can inhibit parents' ability to participate in decision making, and to be fully informed of their child's academic needs and progress (Vigil & Lopez, 2020). Given that parental engagement is cited as the "most credited protective factor [that impacts] children's education," absence of parental participation can contribute greatly to educational inequalities for refugee and asylum-seeking students (Vigil & Lopez, 2020, p. 46).

Social Adjustment and Inclusion

Challenges faced in the education system can compound a student's social adjustment and inclusion. The language barrier also presents a challenge for refugees attempting to communicate with the local community. Student refugees in Norway determined that the primary avenue to integrate into Norwegian society was to speak the language, and those that could not found it difficult to connect with their peers (Brook & Ottemoller, 2020). Differences in language and culture can both bring students together and cause division. Szlyk et al. (2020) found that refugee students from the Northern Triangle countries in the United States were able to come together because of their shared experiences as immigrants and new-language learners.

However, linguistic nuances and cultural differences led to misunderstandings which created conflict and deterred social networks from being formed.

Many refugee youth adopt acculturation strategies in order to integrate into their new community. Acculturation is a person's adaptation from contact with different cultural and psychological changes (Brook & Ottemoller, 2020). Newcomer students who are expected to adapt and adjust to the local culture can struggle with identity. In the cases of Brook and Ottemoller (2020) and Evans et al. (2022), refugee youth can face bullying and peer influences potentially due to their differences in culture, and struggle to balance maintaining their own language and culture and learning about and being accepted into their new culture in the process of adapting to their new environment.

Health

The phases of the pre-migration, during migration, and post-migration processes present different risks and exposures that can affect youth mental and physical health in a variety of ways. In the pre-migration phase, youth are forced to make difficult decisions to leave their homes and support systems in the face of violence. During migration, youth may be further exposed to violence with or without family support. Post-migration, they may deal with unstable living conditions, challenges with acculturation, stress, and other traumatic events (Cleary et al., 2018). All of these events can lead to serious mental and physical health challenges, including PTSD, depression, substance abuse, conduct disorders, and anxiety. De Arellano et al. (2018) found that “children and adolescents who experienced immigration-related trauma were much more likely to endorse symptoms of PTSD and depression, even after accounting for the effects of all other traumatic events” (p. 12).

Benefits of Outdoor Education

The benefits of outdoor education can be divided into four categories: self-perception and confidence; improved school performance; community and relationship building; and improved mental and physical health (Austin et al., 2010; Beames & Atencio, 2008; Brook & Ottemoller, 2020; Cleary et al., 2018; Folke et al., 2010; Garst et al., 2001; Goldenberg et al., 2000; Vella et al., 2013). While they are separate categories, it is important to note that these areas are intertwined. Creating a sense of community is paramount to refugee youth adaptation. Austin et al. (2010) state that “sense of community is linked to increased personal development, networks and support, and increased positive classroom attitudes, learning, and performance” (p.76). Garst et al. (2001) also concluded that youth behavior can be modified through increasing positive self-perception, gaining knowledge, learning new skills, and acquiring new abilities. Experiencing positive peer culture and developing positive peer relationships can enhance youth behavior. Moreover, positive outcomes in one or more of these areas can positively affect other areas of youth development (Garst et al., 2001). Passarelli et al. (2010) found that experiential, strengths-based outdoor and adventure education supported students by concentrating their attention on opportunities for personal growth, improving their personal connections, and assisting them in responding successfully to physical challenge. Norton and Watt (2014) reported substantial evidence that wilderness and adventure programs may enhance youth development in diverse adolescents who are confronted with obstacles that put their positive development at risk.

Self-perception and confidence

Outdoor education programs grounded in experiential learning theory have proven to increase participants’ self-perception and confidence. According to Sibthorp et al. (2011), “frequently reported lessons learned from NOLS [National Outdoor Leadership School], were

changes in life perspective (13%), self-confidence (10%), and self-awareness (9%)” (p. 116).

Outward Bound found statistically positive changes in students’ social-emotional outcomes after courses, especially in group relationships, perseverance, self-regulation, and teamwork (Bergman & McDaniel, 2022). Depending on the participant, different activities like learning to paddle a canoe, climbing to the top of a high-ropes element, or successfully completing a grounds initiative can lead to increased self-confidence and self-awareness. Similarly, successfully overcoming challenges and exploring new landscapes can also have a positive impact in developing participants’ self-awareness and self-concept (McKenzie, 2003).

Improved school performance

In addition to self-perception and confidence, outdoor education has been linked to improved school performance. Supplementing classroom curriculum with outdoor education programs may help students better adapt. James and Williams (2017) found evidence of improved test scores, reduced behavioral challenges, and increased motivation for learning in K-12 curricula that integrated outdoor experiential education. The authors highlight that “scaffolding the learning from the classroom to the field and then back to the classroom results in memorable, comprehensive, and long-term learning” (James & Williams, 2017, p.59). This cyclical process echoes Kolb and Lewis’s (1986) experiential learning cycle that is the foundation of Outward Bound’s educational approach.

Outdoor education opens the door for students to explore through different learning styles. Bredderman (1983) asserts that students who struggle with academics, motivation, attention, or social skills benefit the most from activity-based, immersive, in-context outdoor education. Increased motivation can be directed back into the classroom for enhanced learning, which Warner and Dillenschneider (2019) refer to as the universal design of instruction (UDI).

UDI is meant to “minimize barriers and maximize learning opportunities for students from diverse backgrounds, abilities, and identities” (Warner & Dillenschneider, 2019). UDI focuses on equity in the classroom. It is based on neurological research that examines how individuals identify and classify information, organize and articulate ideas, and what motivates them to continue learning in order to provide a more accessible learning environment (Warner & Dillenschneider, 2019).

Community and relationship building

Outdoor education programs emphasize relationship building and teamwork through a variety of different activities and challenges. Adventure programs offer an array of high- and low-ropes course activities, as well as ground initiatives that teach participants specific lessons. Goldenberg et al. (2000) evidence how ropes course programs use challenges and problems to bring individuals together. Participants are presented with a problem or challenge which they must work with others to solve, after which, they process and reflect on what they have learned and how they can apply their learnings to other settings. In a study of ropes course programs, students identified trust, teamwork, communication, building relationships, setting goals, self-fulfillment, and fun as the benefits of participating (Goldenberg et al., 2000). Among veterans suffering from PTSD, Vella et al. (2013) found that outdoor, experiential education programs foster social support which enhances coping resources for daily stress. Their study identified social support as “an inextricable component” of the participants’ experience which may account for a large amount of their positive gains in psychosocial well-being (Vella et al., 2013, p. 259).

Choice theory, developed by Glasser (1999), states that humans are constantly searching to satisfy five basic needs: survival, love and belonging, power, freedom, and fun. One of the five basic needs, a sense of love and belonging, can be developed through community and

relationship building. Beames & Atencio (2008) underscore how both individuals and their communities can benefit from social relations that are developed in outdoor education settings. These social relations are defined as social capital, or “the quality and aggregation of social relationships that exist within and amongst communities” (Beames & Atencio, 2008, p. 99). Whether they happen between peers or between youth and adults, these connections help adolescents grow by linking them with a larger support network and encouraging them to participate in youth activities that provide them with beneficial socializing opportunities (Seaman et al., 2014). The UN asserts that recreational activities and sports are vital for refugee children and youth’s social development, inclusion, social cohesion, and well-being (UNHCR, 2020). The UNHCR add that sports and recreation provide youth with an important opportunity to engage with the wider community, and that community organizations that work with refugee populations should build partnerships with sporting clubs and organizations to promote sports and recreation (UNHCR, 2020). Outdoor education is well-positioned to improve young people's ability to access social capital at the community level.

Mental and physical benefits

Numerous studies evidence the mental and physical benefits of being in nature. Pasanen et al. (2014) found that exposure to green space combined with physical activity and other parameters resulted in improvements in mood and the body’s reaction to stress. Short-term positive effects of green environment exposure have led to the development of the field of Nature Therapy due to its capacity to facilitate recovery from stress, trauma and conflict. Tidball & Krasny (2014) also point out how green spaces help people suffering from stress, trauma, or conflict find resilience regardless of their cultural, geographical, generational or political boundaries. In fact, Wells (2014) found that simply being close to green space can enhance well-

being, “including buffering life stressors, enhancing coping skills, fostering social interaction, and improving cognitive function” (p. 102). Similarly, Chawla (2014) observed that access to views of natural landscapes and play areas resulted in improved “performance on tests of concentration, inhibiting impulses, and delaying gratification, as well as reduced symptoms of ADHD” among children (p. 115).

Due to the short nature of this proposed program, nature therapy will not be an objective; however, it is important to recognize the trauma participants have faced and understand the mental and physical benefits of being in nature that could positively impact participants during this day-program series.

Components of successful programs

For outdoor education programs to have a positive impact on refugee youth’s self-perception and confidence, improved school performance, community and relationship building, and mental and physical development, they should include certain course components. Reynolds and Bacon (2018) found that successful programs for refugee and asylum-seeking youth include specific cultural and linguistic components tailored to participants’ ethnic background, in which program curriculum and activities are informed by the resettlement experience. In other words, the curriculum should be adapted to the participating groups’ specific experiences and needs within their resettlement process.

To better support refugee youth, multiple stakeholders should be consulted to address the challenges that refugee students face (Reynolds & Bacon, 2018). In addition to connecting with refugee and asylum-seeking youth directly, community organizations should partner with schools, family members, and students collaboratively to address challenges and barriers. “Community organizations that are committed to supporting newcomers’ additive acculturation

and English language development can provide learning opportunities that support youth's ability to overcome commonly encountered challenges and envision themselves as valued members of their community" (Symons & Ponzio, 2019, p. 99).

Given that parents and caregivers are the most important people in a child's life and, in the case of refugees, possibly the only stable figures during turbulent times, it is critical to address the health needs of parents and caregivers to effectively and holistically approach refugee youth health (Alipui & Gerke, 2018).

In addition to connecting with parents, participants should connect with people from their community. Schlünder and Roefs (2017) recommend that people from local populations participate in activities, not only refugees. Participation of the broader population allows for an exchange of cultural values and norms across the community.

Existing outdoor education programs have proven successful with refugees. Through adventure camps, peer mentor leadership training, and ecotherapy, REACH states that 90% of participants report feeling better about themselves, 78% feeling better about their future, and 81% feeling better about making new friends after participating in their programs (REACH, 2019). Other organizations have also indicated positive outcomes from outdoor programming. Outward Bound hosts backpacking programs for former Veterans who struggle with PTSD, depression, and anxiety after returning from war. Studies conducted during these trips have shown significant elevations in attentiveness and positive mood states, and a significant and sustained reduction of symptoms of depression, anxiety and somatic stress, and negative mood states among participants (Vella et al., 2013). Although these courses were not refugee-specific, they evidence the beneficial impacts that outdoor education can have on populations that have experienced trauma.

Research Methodology

To gather information about appropriate and effective curriculum and to explore best practices for working with refugee and asylum-seeking youth, I conducted exploratory interviews with adult employees from organizations that work specifically with refugee and asylum-seeking youth in the United States, and which are located mostly in the Philadelphia area. In this way, I targeted professionals who could provide best practices for working with refugee and asylum-seeking youth, and who could also give insights into current programs that exist and innovative programming that could be implemented in this design. I also conducted a documentary review of studies on the benefits of outdoor education and the refugee experience to better inform the curriculum, and reviewed and referenced current curriculum that exists at POBS.

Findings

The UNHCR Integration Handbook is a comprehensive guide with checklists, practical advice, and best practices to integrate resettled refugees. The UNHCR has identified ten key aspects of resettlement programs: meeting the rights of refugee children and youth; recognizing the impact of the refugee and resettlement experience; planning for children and youth; offering the best conditions for educational success; integration case management; language assistance; language training; orientation; employment; and social connections (UNHCR, 2020). Many of these aspects are included in the programs that currently exist in Philadelphia - although they can be improved upon.

From the interviews conducted, the data suggests that most community-based organizations with resettlement programming are focused on education, social services, and social adjustment for youth populations. They also provide legal, financial, and employment

services. The data corroborates existing literature, which, in one case, states that “community organizations are concerned with newcomers’ personal, familial, and social-emotional needs, which are nonetheless inextricably connected to language development and academic achievement” (Symons & Ponzio, 2019, p. 102).

For participants, ages and grade levels can vary. Programs can last from four weeks to six months with needs-based services provided when the resettlement program has concluded. Existing programs address many of the issues that newcomers face when arriving to the United States, including school enrollment, school orientation, community orientation, ESL programs, and social adjustment.

Organization 1 provides a federally funded program to help participants gain communication and life skills that aid in cultural adaptation. Participants partake in anecdotal discussions and learn techniques and strategies to manage situations they may face in their daily life. After completing the 16-hour program, participants receive follow-up resources on a case-by-case basis, including support for furthering education, job training, English classes, social groups, and referrals for other resources not offered in-house. Wellness workshops encourage participants to make a wellness plan focusing on the eight dimensions of wellness: emotional, physical, occupational, social, spiritual, intellectual, environmental, and financial.

Organization 2 emphasized their use of a trauma-informed approach. With trainings and webinars, they work to educate staff on how to understand trauma in children and give them strategies to help participants focus on their cultural values and what they can contribute to their new environment. The main goals of their programs are to help participants increase self-confidence and give them the tools to express themselves and communicate with peers and teachers. Programs involve art and music so students can creatively express themselves. Older

students are able to participate in a mentoring program. Retired teachers and college students volunteer to help newcomer high school students prepare for the SATs, apply to college, and fill out FAFSA forms in preparation for college.

Organization 3 highlighted three major programs they offer: school enrollment, youth mentoring, and external partnerships. School enrollment happens within 60 days of a refugee's arrival and includes orientation for students and parents about how the school system works, grading, transportation, and communication with the schools. Students are provided materials, supplies, and uniforms they will need. The organization also advocates for refugees when they face racism, bullying, and problems with school administration. Youth mentoring programs are divided by age, and volunteer mentors help students with homework, projects, and university preparation. Mentees and mentors are paired based on needs and interests. All participants have an Individual Student Plan (ISP) with goals that they want to achieve over the 12-week program, and there are various check-ins during the program to ensure participants stay on track. After the 12 weeks, participants are given support on a case-by-case basis. External partnerships include sports and activities that youth can participate in outside of school. Their programs are focused on education, social adjustment, and social inclusion.

All of my research identified language as the most important barrier that newcomer students face in the resettlement process. One representative stated that, often students are quickly identified as shy or uninterested, when, in reality, their English language skills inhibit their communication. All of the organizations I spoke with offer ESL programs and language support, and the School District of Philadelphia also has ESL classes for students. The same representative pointed out that all schools have immigrant students with language barriers, not just refugee and asylum-seekers. These students are not alone in the struggle to learn English.

Other barriers mentioned in the interviews were identity struggles, culture shock, adapting to a different school system, dealing with trauma, balancing busy schedules, and adapting to new technology.

The three organizations I spoke with conduct online programming. They interact with students in the online setting only, not in person. This is curious given that all three representatives stated that technology was a barrier for refugee and asylum-seeking students, be it access to technology and the internet or digital literacy.

The importance of addressing mental health in resettling youth was emphasized in all interviews, but representatives stated that the programs they offered were not necessarily equipped to do so. Organization 2 uses a trauma-informed approach, providing students with art, physical education, and music classes to better express themselves and focus on self-expression and feeling words in ESL classes so students are better prepared to express themselves in daily life. Organization 1 had a therapist on-site but would make referrals for participants to see mental health professionals off-site if necessary. Organization 3 does not have internal supports for students who are dealing with trauma and mental health issues.

The findings suggest that schools, community organizations, and government organizations are working with limited resources. Representatives express that schools offer some resources for students that are resettling but it is not enough. School ESL programs are beneficial for students in terms of language learning, but the lack of funding and staff that speak students' native languages limit schools' abilities to adequately meet refugee students' needs. A multi-stakeholder, collaborative approach, as addressed previously, could be beneficial to alleviate students' needs. Studies have shown that "partnerships [between schools, community organizations, and the government] were essential to maintaining a holistic approach to

supporting refugee students” in Australia (Symons & Ponzio, 2019, p. 102). Schools partner with community organizations to provide a variety of legal, academic, financial, and social supports. Community organizations partner with government organizations for funding and materials. Immigrant organizations partner with other community organizations to offer extracurricular activities, such as running and soccer clubs.

Discussion

Based on the interviews and information gathered from documents and studies, for an experiential, outdoor education program targeting refugee populations to be successful it should include additive acculturation, trauma support, and communication strategies and skills. Additive acculturation is “the process in which immigrants adjust to their new culture while still maintaining pride in and substantive connections to their heritage and country of origin” (Paterson, 2017). In this way, refugee youth add to the culture of the place they live instead of assimilating. While trauma support is an important resource for refugee and asylum-seeking youth, there will not be enough time in this short 4-day day program series to adequately manage participants’ trauma. Instead, program facilitators will be educated with trauma-informed strategies and approaches to better understand how trauma has impacted these participants. Curriculum will also be trauma-informed to create a supportive learning environment that helps participants avoid re-traumatization. This will entail training staff in trauma-informed approaches and self-regulation strategies, creating a positive environment where participants can build healthy relationships with adults and their peers, and providing participants with a safe environment where they can practice self-regulation strategies and social skills. Lastly, language learning is not a main goal of the proposed program; however, students will be given ample opportunities to practice their English language skills in a safe, judgement-free manner.

The proposed program will include distinct activities that are focused on achieving a specific and different goal each day. The goal of the first day will be to create connections within the group and to get to know each other better. Ground activities will include asking fun questions, and activities with various challenge levels to keep students engaged and encourage communication and connection building. Day 1 will end with the zipline. The zipline is a fun activity that students can do in pairs which emphasizes the day's goal of building connection, but it requires a more individual response to the challenge. It allows participants to have fun together and explore common ground, while not needing to rely so much on another person to complete the activity. Day 2 will involve further connection building and increased challenge and team building. There is more of an emphasis on pair activities and moments to share deeper thoughts and feelings. Pair activities transition well into canoeing in pairs on the Strawberry Mansion Reservoir. On Day 3 participants will get an opportunity to explore Wissahickon Park and dive deeper into trust activities. Activities will include more time to explore the park and interact with each other. On the final day, participants will face new challenges based on their progress over the previous sessions and will be a culmination of the skills they learn. The final activity, the Goal Pole has participants supporting each other with belay ropes while a student climbs to the top of the pole and jumps off. It is important to note that the curriculum planned for this program is not fixed and can be adapted to fit the students' needs.

Table 1: Proposed Program

Day	Goal(s)	Ground Activities	Adventure Activity
1	Connection/ Get to know each other	Name games Connection Cards Turnstile One fish two fish	Zipline

2	Connection / More challenge and team building	Connection Cards Pair shares/ pair activities Nature walk around reservoir	Canoeing
3	Trust building/get to know the space / more pair interaction	Wissahickon hike Pair shares Camouflage Pipeline around the trails	Vertical Play Gym (VPG)
4	Dig deeper/trust building/team building/overcoming obstacles Transference	Acid River Ski Skates Islands Bulls ring in the woods	Goal Pole

The activities proposed in this curriculum can help students overcome some of the barriers they face during the resettlement process. To avoid challenges that digital literacy can present and to enhance the participants' experience and growth, the programs will be held in-person so that students will be able to interact with their peers face-to-face. During the first day, the program content will focus on connection and relationship building. Participants will engage in activities that involve working together as a team and in smaller groups. They will get to know each other, find hobbies and interests that they have in common, and begin to feel more comfortable with each other. During the interviews with the organizations, language was cited as the number one barrier that refugee and asylum-seeking youth face. Through intentional, small group games and pair-share activities, participants will practice their language skills and build confidence in their language abilities among their peers, and in a variety of contexts. To ease communication stressors and engage in new ways of communication, the program includes physical activities and problem-solving games that allow participants to use body movements, hand gestures, and other means of non-verbal communication to get their points across and express themselves. For example, the zipline is an adventure activity done in pairs that aids

participants in building connections through shared experiences without the pressure of verbal communication.

The second day will build on the relationships made during day one. As participants feel more comfortable with each other, they will be given space to communicate more. Pair share and partner activities will help establish trust needed for canoeing. By forming relationships with peers their own age who are going through the same resettlement process, participants will work on social inclusion and adjustment strategies. Nature walks will also be incorporated to give youth an opportunity to explore and connect with the space. It is important to note that trauma-informed approaches are key to creating a safe space where students can express themselves, their feelings, and identities without judgement.

Day three will combine pair share activities with larger group collaboration. Participants will have an opportunity to explore Philadelphia's second largest park. They will also climb a physically demanding vertical element, and they will need to rely on their groupmates to complete the challenge. Given the emphasis on trauma-informed education, all ground initiatives and high-ropes activities will offer varied levels of challenge and involvement to accommodate the participants' physical, mental, and emotional conditions and contexts.

The last day will build on all the skills they have learned throughout the program series. Not only will the focus be on digging deeper, using the trust and relationships they have built to overcome challenges with grounds initiatives, but there will also be an emphasis on transference of the skills they learn into their everyday life.. The Goal Pole is a group exercise that gives participants an opportunity to think about a goal for the future, which they shout as they swing off the pole. Concluding? debrief activities will also emphasize transference of what they have done at POBS to their daily lives.

This program will be supplemental to programs that are already offered in Philadelphia. Most services have been offered virtually for the past few years, which allows for some interaction, but can still be isolating. This POBS program will be in an outdoor area that is safe for participants to interact together in the same physical space, not through screens. It is also important to note that some students may not participate in every day of the program series, although that is ideal. The curriculum is meant to be scaffolded for challenge, but there are levels within those challenges to accommodate participants that cannot come to every program day. If this is the case, they will still receive similar experiences with trust building, relationship building, and fun.

Conclusions, Limitations, and Future Considerations

According to the results of this research, refugee and asylum-seeking youth face a variety of challenges when resettling to the United States, including barriers to education, social adjustment and inclusion, and mental and physical health. Current resettlement programs provide valuable resources for education, legal, cultural, and medical support that help youth and their families in the first three to six months upon arrival to the United States, but resources are limited. Interviewees from the provider organizations indicated that greater support is essential to aiding refugee and asylum-seeking youth in the resettlement process. One means of offering greater support is through peer-to-peer outdoor experiences. Outdoor education has proven benefits in youth development, specifically in the areas of self-perception and confidence, school performance, community and relationship building, and augmenting mental and physical health. Existing outdoor education programs for refugee and asylum-seeking youth have created positive outcomes for youth development; and POBS is well-positioned to offer immigrant children programs, spaces, and resources that can support them in the resettlement process.

In gathering research for the creation of this program, I faced some limitations. First and foremost, I only spoke with employees of organizations that work with the target population, and I did not directly speak to the children or their families. In this way, I did not have the opportunity to perform a needs analysis directly with potential participants which could have better informed the proposed program. According to Biasutti and Concina (2021), “a student-centered approach [is] crucial for intercultural education that promotes the inclusion and well-being of migrant students” (p. 995). To make the proposed program student-centered, it will be necessary to perform a needs analysis of the participants to ensure the program is aligned with their needs. I also was limited in the number of organizations from which I was able to obtain data. To get a better idea of what types of programs are offered, I would have liked to speak with more than three organizations, or more representatives from those organizations that work with different age groups and in different areas of programming.

The length of this program is also limiting. As previously mentioned, four days is not enough time to engage in nature therapy and to dive deeper into the trauma that students have faced. I hope that the proposed program will lead to a longer, 7-day expedition in the future. Students will have already formed relationships with each other from the day-program series, and the trip will provide more opportunities for participants to learn self-regulation strategies to manage their emotions in challenging situations that could be related to their trauma. The structure for this type of program is already in place at POBS and can easily be adapted for the needs of this population. Currently, POBS offers a program for Veterans. Veterans are offered a series of day-programs to participate in before they go out on a 7-day expedition. This structure could be adapted for refugee and asylum-seeking youth.

The curriculum I have proposed does not include the parents of refugee and asylum-seeking youth. Alipui and Gerke (2018) as well as several of the representatives I spoke with, noted that parents and adults in children's lives play a primary role in their development; and therefore, they should be involved in the program as well. In this regard, POBS has conducted simultaneous programming in the past and would be able to host a day-program where both parents and children could participate and be supported.

One other element that I will seek to integrate into future programming is the community. The current, proposed curriculum does not involve community members and local populations as previously emphasized in the literature review. I hope to find ways to either incorporate these programs into existing community days or school district programs at POBS or to be sure that these students are aware of and able to participate in these activities in addition to this specific program.

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