



researcher's notebook

Converging Issues in an Out-of-school Time Program for African Refugee Children

by Michelle Porche

Note from the Managing Editor

Immigrant youth and families have historically faced barriers to access and inclusion in a variety of social institutions, including not only schools but also out-of-school time (OST) programs. Language, culture, and social barriers can diminish the contributions OST programs can make to healthy youth and family development. More exploratory research is needed to identify the OST program practices and characteristics that best support immigrant youth and families.

In September 2010, a research team from the Wellesley Centers for Women began such exploratory research in several urban locations in Massachusetts and New Hampshire. Our specific aims are to:

- Identify models of OST program delivery for immigrant youth and families
- Document effective practices to support immigrant youth and families, including not only equitable, accessible, high-quality learning practices and connections with schools but also factors related to program infrastructure, staffing, curriculum, and management

Program observation and staff interviews are our major data collection approaches.

This exploratory research study on OST programming with refugee and immigrant families builds on a previous needs assessment that began with community stakeholders in New Hampshire, including African ethnic organizations, mental health providers, school personnel, and government agencies. (For information, see www.wcwonline.org/nhrefugee.)

The Wellesley Centers for Women recently began a collaboration with one of the major stakeholders in that needs assessment, the Women for Women Coalition, to develop and pilot an ongoing family intervention in New Hampshire. The resulting collaborative project, Africans United for Stronger Families, includes a support group for parents and an OST program for their children. Africans United is a scientifically based family support program whose curriculum was developed by the Wellesley Centers for Women and the Women for Women Coalition based on research into African refugee parents' and communities' priorities for their children's education and well-being.

An integral part of the family support intervention is a culturally responsive OST program for adolescents. Developed and administered by the Women for Women Coalition, this program focuses on academic success and offers extensive tutoring and homework help. The Manchester School Department provides some funding to Women for Women Coalition to help with academic tutoring for elementary-age children; funding for programming for older students is provided by grants from local foundations.

The following field notes begin to capture the profound interconnection of culture, race, trauma, language, age, family, and social norms in an OST and family support program. Field notes are the notes that a researcher—in this case, Michelle Porche—takes during study observations. They may later be used for report writing, journaling, discussion, or subsequent study design. Michelle's field notes come from the needs assessment and the Africans United intervention study.

Field Notes, November 2010

The refugee population of New Hampshire includes families who have come in sequential waves of resettlement from Eastern Europe, Africa, and Asia, most as a result of war. One of the earlier waves was from Bosnia; then came refugees from various African countries and more recently from Bhutan, a tiny Asian nation. Although these groups share trauma experiences and resettlement challenges, they differ by culture, language, visibility as an ethnic minority, and family education and literacy levels. These factors all play a part in expectations about in-school and OST experiences.

Approximately 5,000 African refugees have resettled in New Hampshire over the last decades, often with the help of Lutheran Social Services. They come from the war-torn countries of Burundi, Congo, Rwanda, Liberia, Somalia, and Sudan, to name a few. Each country has its own language and customs, but they share some common African cultural practices. Somalis tend to be more highly educated, while other groups range in their level of formal education. Some groups are illiterate in both their native language and English. Liberian refugees enter the U.S. knowing English, so they have some advantage in adjustment.

In contrast to Bosnian refugees, who arrived in this country fresh from day-to-day war experiences, many African refugees fled from war in their home countries to refugee camps in neighboring countries and then spent years in the camps before being resettled to the U.S. Thus, though the children may not have experienced directly the atrocities their parents endured, they suffer from secondary trauma. The camps were often dangerous, and poor nutrition, which can affect brain development and lead to later cognitive and behavioral problems, was a constant concern.

Acculturative Stress

Parents and children become acculturated at vastly different rates. Because of children's immersion in school, they learn English much more quickly and often have to serve as translators for their parents (although legally, non-English speaking refugees and immigrants have a right to translation services, and children should not be relied on to translate health- and education-related interactions).

New Hampshire, the "Live Free or Die" state, poses particular challenges for African parents, who report that their children are taught (or simply internalize) messages from peers and adults that they are now "free," which is interpreted to mean doing anything they want and having complete independence from parents and elders.

This rebellion is one of the most distressing aspects of resettlement; it often retriggeres the parents' trauma. In a common example, children rebel against discipline from their parents and call 911 in response to corporal punishment, a culturally accepted practice among Africans. Police often rely on the children for translation. The parents are powerless, and their authority is undermined. Teens' newfound independence may also be manifest in breaking curfew and engaging in delinquent behaviors. The difficulties are exacerbated for youth who enter the U.S. as older teenagers and are placed in classrooms according to age rather than literacy level. Some of these youth, mostly boys, find that they successfully obtain the respect of peers by being "tough" and by breaking school rules and the law.

As visible members of a minority group in a majority white community, youth and parents report incidents of racism and discrimination, which also may lead to conflicts in school and in OST programs. Interestingly, reports from youth highlighted conflicts with other minorities, primarily Latino immigrants, and with other African ethnic groups. Some youth and community leaders have reported that white students sometimes encourage these conflicts, helping to pit one group against another. New students are often placed in special education or ESL classrooms, and the process of moving to mainstream programs is slow.

Cultural Conflicts in OST Programming

Emphasis on recreation is a Western notion not easily understood by African refugee parents. In an earlier needs assessment, we found that Anglo community leaders suggested youth soccer leagues as a response to trauma issues. More generally, this suggestion reflected beliefs about the importance of building self esteem and acknowledged the popularity of soccer in other countries as compared to the U.S. While the recreational opportunities provided by OST programs are important, African parents and community leaders give them low priority as responses to youths' struggles with academic requirements. Parents are genuinely perplexed about the many dances in middle and high schools and in afterschool pro-

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grams; they believe the dances encourage dating before children are ready and too often occur on school nights or last too late into the evening. These parents have endured extreme hardships to get their families to the U.S. in order to give their children a better life, and educational achievement is seen as the avenue for success.

In addition to its academic focus, parents feel that the Women for Women Coalition program reinforces culturally based behavioral expectations. The program director is working with parents and youth in an attempt to institute a practice of allowing students to go to non-academic programs as a reward for improved homework practices and strong grades.

Recently, the program director held a meeting with directors of the other afterschool programs to bridge cultural understanding and to coordinate participation of African youth. Currently, the feeling is that these programs are competing for African youth. The youth gravitate towards less structured programs with limited monitoring, which undermines the community's emphasis on academic achievement and family cohesion. The goal of the meeting was to introduce cultural competence to staff at the other programs and to work together to coordinate how they can best serve African refugee students.

Looking Forward

Lessons learned from working with this African refugee program in New Hampshire, along with observation and interview data from immigrant and refugee OST programs in Massachusetts and New Hampshire, will help to inform the development of strategies and related training for OST programs that serve immigrant and refugee populations. Although language and acculturation challenges overlap for immigrant and refugee youth and families, the unique cultural backgrounds of various groups and their histories of migration will differ. Children's educational experiences in their countries of origin and their English proficiency when they immigrate to the U.S. may influence their initial participation in OST activities. For refugees, mental health concerns related to community and individual trauma may have a significant impact on children's behavioral patterns and well-being. Each of these components should be considered in working with immigrant and refugee youth in OST programs and in reaching out to their parents.