

Somali Boys Group Case Study

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Abstract: This case of a Somali Boys group explores a critical incident that highlights intersecting areas of culture and co-leadership in group work with refugee youth. The critical incident challenges the group to maintain their native culture while learning to adapt to the host culture. The incident also represented a test of whether facilitators would live up to the mission of the group. Recommendations for intervening in culturally respectful ways are highlighted.

OVERVIEW OF GROUP AND CONTEXT

Description of Agency

The Somali Boys Group was sponsored by a program at a large teaching hospital as a part of a grant funded program to increase mental health access for hard to reach immigrant and refugee communities. The group took place in an urban setting. This school-based group serves middle school aged (12-14) boys. The facilitators were two professionals, one native English speaker and the other was a refugee from similar background as participants.

Description of Group

The group entitled “Promoting Resilience Among Refugee and Immigrant Children” was comprised of approximately eight members who were all male (there was a parallel girls’ group).

All Group members were of African descent and Muslim. Though all the group members were refugees, they had different acculturation levels as well different experiences related to trauma and loss. For example, some youth had lost their whole family to the war or were separated from them and were being raised by relatives while others were part of intact families that migrated together. In addition, the group was open to differently abled students.

Reason for forming the group: The group focuses on decreasing acculturative stress and increasing social support, factors known to be associated with better mental health among refugee youth. It sought to support the healthy integration of refugee youth into schools and

supported timely and appropriate referral to services in the native language to increase service access and engagement in the schools. This was a closed group that met for 12 sessions.

Mission/Purpose of group: The mission of “Promoting Resilience Among Refugee and Immigrant Children” was to create a safe and structured environment to address acculturation issues such as acculturation gap between parents and children and isolation and marginalization due to acculturative stress, and peer conflict due to cultural, linguistic, ethnic and other differences. The group curriculum focused on building a sense of belonging and provide a space in where the students can learn valuable social and school readiness skills. The developers used Community-Based Participatory Research(CBPR) to engage community members as partners and the group development came out of consultation/research with refugee communities that pointed to group work being more acceptable to refugee communities. Target community, school staff and project staff all worked together to create the group.

CASE STUDY

The Critical Incident, Challenge or Situation

The incident described here took place early in the group cycle. It happened right after we finished the main activity as we were distributing the snacks in preparation for the main discussion. The group was sitting in a circle around a table and group members were in the process of opening their drinks, etc. All group members (8 boys) were present as well as the two group leaders.

Our group activities are usually divided into the following three parts:

- When group members arrive we do “taps” which consists of using a beach ball to get the kids expend some energy before the main activity. Group members tap a beach ball to one another while using one hand, or timing the taps with prompts to members, for example, to share something interesting about themselves.
- The taps are usually followed by the main activity which integrates a fun learning exercise and is focused on main issues that refugee youth struggle with as they adjust to being in a new culture and new school. The group leaders choose activities from a

toolbox for that week's lesson. Sample activities might focus on communication, conflict resolution and respecting differences. This is usually followed by a snack and discussion where students can talk about the activity and connect it to their own experiences. The discussion is framed around the lesson of the activity. Group leaders ask participants what they learnt in doing the activity. The discussion is open to the students and the group leaders elicit group member ideas and impressions and redirect as necessary when the discussion veers away from the day's topic.

- Finally, there is a wrap-up/mindfulness exercise to allow students to calm down and prepare to return to classroom learning. Each session lasted approximately 45 minutes.

The incident occurred directly after the main activity as we were about to sit down for discussion. As group members opened their drinks and began to eat their snacks in preparation for the discussion, one of the boys spontaneously began to recite religious verses from the Koran in Arabic. He took a posture that is usually associated with this activity in religious setting – half eyes closed, body erect and hands on his sides. As we way to validate the group members' native culture while also helping them learn how to interact and form healthy relationships with the host culture, the group was led by one leader who cultural background was similar to that of the group participants. The second co-facilitator was from the host culture and did not share the same cultural background nor speak the native language of the group members. Therefore, as the youth continued to recite the Koran, the American born group leader had no idea what was happening. The other kids appeared somewhat confused, but sat quietly out of respect for the religious verses that the youth was reciting. The American-born group leader did not understand what the youth was saying nor what to do, but she respectfully waited for a cue from her colleague.

How was the incident, challenge or situation addressed?

This was a very challenging situation for the group co-facilitator who shared the participants' culture and understood what was happening. First, what the youth was doing would be considered appropriate behavior in most community contexts. Community members would react exactly as the other youth group members were reacting which to silently listen and even praise the youth for being religious. Second, the youth who was doing this had previously struggled with following group rules and had been disruptive. So one could look at this as another attempt

on his part to disrupt the group, but in using religion as his way of deviating from group rules, he created a very complex and challenging problem for the group leaders.

The Somali group leader knew that even she could not simply interrupt the child and tell him that he should not do that in the group. That would have created a scandal as it would have been perceived as her disrespecting a religious practice and the cultural norms that say that adults should encourage children to practice their faith. She also wanted the American leader not to do anything that would be perceived as disrespectful either. What she wanted was to make sure to praise the youth for doing something positive (reciting the Koran) thus showing respect for the cultural norms of the youth while at the same time continuing to do the group work and ensuring that group norms were being followed. The lesson that she wanted to give to the students was that it is always good to act appropriately but it also good to know what behaviors are appropriate where and when.

What the group leader did was to wait for a break in his recitation where she could interrupt without disrespect, and then she used something that the group leaders had already put in place which is that we would keep everyone in the loop of our activities and that we would do activities that all group members could participate in. In this case, one of the group leaders did not know what was happening, so she used that group norm to redirect.

The group facilitator responded as follows:

“Ali, it is so wonderful that you know the Koran so well (this reinforced both the positive aspect of the Koran recitation as well as highlighting a positive competency in a youth who has struggled in both school and group setting). I am really impressed and your parents would be so proud!! Now, I am so sad that Ms. Bright (co-facilitator) who is part of our team could not understand what you were doing. Ms. Bright, you must have been so confused by this. Well, Ali, just recited something that is very important in our culture. Ali, would tell Ms. A, what Chapter in the Koran, this was from?” The student proceeded to proudly tell her the chapter. Then the group leader explained to her co-leader and to the group, “you know this is really important part of our culture. And, it is important for our kids to do it which is probably why Ali did. I am so sad you could not understand it Ms. Bright for the meaning is very important in our faith”. She

then reminded the group that while this is an important and valued activity, it left one of the group members (Ms. Bright) out. She asked them to remind each other of the group rules they put in place about inclusion. She said something like, “This is why group rules such as ensuring that we do/say things that all group members can participate are important. It is great to read the Koran but in the group where we have people who did not understand what it was it can be confusing and leave people out. We can read the Koran when we are at home, our when we take a break during prayer times. Also, if we are having a group discussion where you think a Koranic verse or chapter would be appropriate for the discussion, please feel free to bring it up and we can discuss it in English so that Ms. Bright can be part of the discussion. Also, this might a good time to remind each other that there are different behaviors that are appropriate in different settings. For example, can someone tell me a place where we read the Koran loudly and recite it?”

-Many students raised their hands and said “Dugsi”

Co-ethnic group leader: Can someone explain what that is?

Student A: It is a Koran school where we learn the Koran and memorize it.

Co-ethnic group leader: Great job!! That is exactly an appropriate place to recite the Koran. We can also do it at the Mosque and we can do it in our homes. There are also appropriate times. For example, when you take out time for prayer during the day but in the classroom when we are learning together with people from different cultures, it is important to focus on the lessons/activities that we have planned. Group members accepted supported this and the group was able to move on from this. Ali, was very happy that his demonstration of knowledge was not punished or silenced but praised. He was able to rejoin the group and was able to be a productive part of group activities for the rest of the group life.

SUGGESTED AREAS FOR DISCUSSION

Reflection on the Incident and the Group by the Worker

Ali was a group member who has had difficulties with the group guidelines, and whose actions could be seen as attention seeking. His action of reciting the Koran went against the group rules but at the same time was hard for group members to challenge because it was a culturally valued activity among youth. This was even more challenging because one of the group leaders did not understand the significance of the event, and could have done something that damaged the group's reputation among the parents and community. Given that the group was formed to help students maintain their native culture while learning to adapt to the host culture, the incident represented a challenge to the very mission of the group. This incident was a test of whether we would live up to the mission of the group.

I think that almost everyone was confused. Other group members understood the cultural relevance of the recitation but they were confused by the context. Also, they were caught between cultural rule (respect the Koran) and group rule (follow group norms). It was a very difficult situation and it was important for the group leaders to demonstrate a grasp of the competing loyalties and to validate group member confusion by describe their own. Furthermore, for kids who are struggling with acculturative stress, the ability to manage situations where the rules/norms of new culture come into conflict with the values of the native culture was something that these youth face every day. Therefore, group leaders needed to show that this was not something that was out of the ordinary for members, but rather an experience like many others they experienced in their day-to-day lives. They also needed guidance in how to manage these conflicting demands.

I think the importance of my role is the reason why I thought this was an appropriate case to share. Often, groups for immigrant and refugee youth are run by people who do not speak the language of these youth and do not understand their cultural practices. In this case, it was very important that we had someone who understood what was being recited and how to manage the incident in a way that respected the group norms while not violating cultural values of group members. It was also important that my co-leader and I had rehearsed scenarios where it would

be important for one or the other of us to take the lead. For example, we agreed that any issue that had to do with religion would be mine to resolve. This understanding between the two facilitators illustrates why it is important for group leaders who do cross-cultural work to plan beforehand for issues that can arise that are very sensitive and who would lead discussion around these issues when they arise.

This youth group member struggled with ways to find his place in the group. His act of employing a community-sanctioned activity such as reciting religious text might be seen as a way of increasing his standing in the community (making him look like a “good” studious kid rather than a troublemaker). Viewing his behavior as resilient, creative and adaptive, it was crucial to encourage his observance of group norms without damaging his standing in the group - which would have further pushed him into acting outside group norms. The group happily returned to work because we were able to use existing group norms (e.g. do activities that all group members including group leaders understand/can participate in).

As a group leader this incident helped me learn the importance of group work being grounded in the culture, experience and ways of being of group members. Group leaders who are working cross-culturally need to plan for moments that are both simple (a child reciting a religious text) and complicated (systemic process such as group norms versus valued religious practices). What this episode illustrates to me is group space is a place where we invite people to be themselves and adolescents like this young man who are also immigrants/refugees are struggling with finding their identity and voice and demonstrating competency. Often, these youth might struggle with school work because of missed educational opportunities during the time they spent in refugee camps, but even in the refugee camps they were taught the Koran and the capacity to read, write and recite Koran is highly valued in the community in which the youth belong. It was crucial, therefore, that we as group leaders understood the cultural and Experiential significance of the act. It reminded us that simply because youth join the group does not mean that who they are and who they have been has been left behind. What is important was to validate the youth as well as others who shared in experience and culture. Our group norms and our capacity to frame the redirection in a positive and cultural sensitive way allowed us to proceed with group work and turn this moment into a positive learning moment.