Creating an Occupation-Based Psychosocial and Life Skills Program for Refugee Adolescents

Creating an Occupation-Based Psychosocial and Life Skills Program for Refugee Adolescents

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Abstract

Objective: The objective of this capstone was to develop a psycho-social and life skills program for refugee adolescents at Georgia Fugees Academy Charter School (GFACS). The aim of this project was to create a psychosocial and life skills program addressing communication and relationships, organization and time management, stress management, habits and health promotion, and creative self-expression.

Design: This study applied a cross-sectional phenomenological design using semi-structured interviews.

Participants: The participants were staff members at GFACS who work closely with and support students (n=3).

Main Outcome Measure(s): Participants provided feedback through open-ended questions regarding the effectiveness of the program, focusing on its clarity and cultural relevance. Additionally, they shared insights on strategies for implementation and sustainability, as well as potential limitations.

Results: All three participants answered the same set of questions and provided feedback. Thematic analysis provided three themes. The first theme acknowledged the program's comprehensive content and suggested enhancements such as the inclusion of topics like self-awareness, self-esteem, and emotional intelligence, in addition to improvements in delivery methods. The second theme underscored the importance of integrating mental wellness topics into the school curriculum, while addressing implementation challenges. The third theme emphasized the importance of utilizing external resources such as technology and external professionals/funding to support long-term sustainability of the program.

Conclusions: The findings offer valuable insights for refining and optimizing the psychosocial and life skills program, with a focus on implementation and sustainability of the program. Recommendations include extending topics to include selfhood development, ensuring the program uses culturally sensitive language, integrating topics into the curriculum, addressing implementation challenges, and leveraging external resources to ensure long-term sustainability and effectiveness for the refugee student population.

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Summary

The purpose of this capstone project aimed to address the following question: ‘How can a five-week psychosocial and life skills program focused on promoting the mental wellness of refugee adolescents be implemented at Georgia Fugees Academy Charter School (GFACS)?’ The mental health of young refugees, especially in the context of resettlement, is a pressing concern due to their heightened vulnerability to psychosocial challenges (Oleimat et al., 2023). Despite limited occupation-based interventions tailored for this demographic, there's a growing recognition of the importance of promoting mental well-being in refugee youth (Parsonage-Harrison et al., 2022). Drawing from interdisciplinary perspectives, interventions with refugee youth and nondisplaced youth focused on social-emotional skills, stress management, art expression, and health promotion have shown promise for improving mental wellness (Fazel et al., 2012; Lamboy et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2022; Cahill et al., 2020). Addressing the lack of specialized resources (Saxena & Ommeren, 2017), particularly in school settings, is crucial, with emphasis on delivering interventions school-wide to destigmatize mental health support (Helping Adolescents Thrive Toolkit, 2021).

By implementing an occupation-based psychosocial and life skills program, integrating evidence-based strategies like social-emotional skill development, stress management, and creative self-expression, there exists a promising avenue to improve occupational health and mental well-being in refugee adolescents. The purpose of this capstone was to develop a psychosocial and life skills program for refugee adolescents at GFACS. The aim of this project was to create a program targeting psychosocial and life skills by addressing communication and relationships, organization and time management, stress management, habits and health promotion, and creative self-expression.

An informal needs assessment at GFACS was conducted through semi-structured interviews, resulting in a SWOT analysis. GFACS demonstrates strengths in supporting refugee adolescents, with a history of catering to their needs and fostering cultural diversity. The dedicated faculty provides crucial support through cultural humility and close relationships. However, administrative challenges like transitioning to a charter school and ongoing construction hinder student support efforts. The absence of an occupational therapist on staff limits access to specialized services. Opportunities for funding and partnerships exist, but threats such as policy changes, educational gaps, parental limitations, socioeconomic factors, and high absenteeism rates pose significant challenges to implementing a psychosocial and life skills program for refugee students at GFACS.

This capstone output was a five week psychosocial and life skills program aimed to provide a holistic approach to support the occupational and mental wellness of refugee adolescents at GFACS. Through a series of instructional lessons, the program focused on enhancing psychosocial skills and equipping students with essential life skills necessary for their occupational well-being and development. Feedback from staff members (n=3) via semi-structured interviews was analyzed to assess effectiveness, implementation, and sustainability of instructional materials. This program aimed to support schools serving refugee youth in fostering a culture of mental wellness promotion and equipping them with essential tools and skills to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally. This program sought to foster resilience, promote psychosocial skills, and enhance occupational well-being in refugee youth.

Literature Review

Recently, the mental health of young refugees has become a topic of concern as part of the larger discussion on forced displacement and humanitarian crises (USA for United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 2023). Nakeyar et al. (2018) explains that refugees, who are individuals who have been forced to flee their home countries due to persecution, conflict, or violence, often face significant challenges when trying to adjust to new environments and restart their lives. The researchers found that the process of resettlement, where refugees establish permanent residence in host countries, is where many refugee adults receive the most resources and services. Smooth transition for refugee youth, however, hinges on addressing their social, cultural, familial, and relational needs (Nakeyar et al., 2018). Due to the complexities that occur during this adjustment, the mental health of these young individuals is of heightened importance (Oleimat et al., 2023). One such way of improving mental health outcomes can be addressing mental health literacy in schools (Arbesman et al. 2013). It is important to understand, from an interdisciplinary perspective, the connection of refugee youth experiences, refugee youth mental health, and the effectiveness of interventions to address refugee youth mental health.

Research conducted by Oleimat et al. (2023) highlights the heightened vulnerability of refugee youth to psychosocial and mental health challenges. In particular, the psychosocial adaptation of refugee youth remains a significant challenge even after resettlement (Fazel et al., 2012). Fazel et al. (2012) found that refugee children continue to exhibit high rates of anxiety and demonstrate inadequate coping mechanisms in the face of external stressors. There is also a higher incidence of anxiety, depression, or posttraumatic stress disorder(PTSD) in refugee youth

(Charbonneau et al., 2021). Based on systematic review of the literature, evidence-based interventions tailored specifically to enhance mental health and psychosocial well-being in this demographic remain limited (Oleimat et al., 2023).

Within the broader field of occupation-based practices for *nondisplaced* children and adolescents, particularly in fostering social-emotional skills, evidence-based interventions are more prevalent compared to the limited evidence-based interventions for refugee youth. Notably, Arbesman et al. (2013) reviewed the effectiveness of an occupation-based program in school settings for enhancing social-emotional skills among young individuals. They found that school-wide after school programs focused on the "promotion of mental health" rather than the "prevention of mental illness" was an effective model for improving social and emotional skills in children (Arbesman et al., 2013). This successful model could potentially be adapted to benefit refugee youth, thereby improving their social-emotional outcomes. The current lack of literature points to a need for more targeted interventions within school systems designed to improve the occupational challenges faced by refugee youth (Parsonage-Harrison et al., 2022).

According to Lamboy et al. (2022), the abundance of mental health disorders in the refugee adolescent population points to the need for increased education on psychosocial and life skills that are the foundation of promoting mental health. The researchers emphasized the promotion of social and communication skills in refugee youth as a vital pathway to improve mental health outcomes. Heightened interpersonal skills that focus on awareness of self and others has positive implications for resilience to stress and self-regulation in refugee youth (Lamboy et al., 2022). Refugee teens often lack effective ways to deal with stress, so teaching stress management is vital (Fazel et al., 2012). Interventions that include teaching skills like

understanding emotions and relaxation techniques have been successful in reducing symptoms of PTSD, depression, and grief in high school refugee students (Charbonneau et al., 2021).

Moreover, art interventions have been shown as a significant approach in engaging refugee families and children and facilitating emotional expression (Christie, 2022). Art expression has also been recognized as an effective tool for fostering communication and confidence among refugees (Hoyne, 2022). This aligns with findings from Cahill et al. (2020), emphasizing the pivotal role of occupation-based activities of play and creative self-expression in promoting mental health, behaviors, and social engagement among nondisplaced youth.

Furthermore, focusing on life skills centered on healthy habits and health promotion has demonstrated positive influence on the subjective well-being of nondisplaced adolescents (Smith et al., 2022). Notably, incorporating habits like sleep hygiene, establishing bedtime routines, engaging in regular physical activity, and establishing cognitive and emotional well-being has proven particularly beneficial for the mental health of nondisplaced adolescents (Smith et al., 2022). While comparable research on refugee youth is limited, there is potential to adapt these health-promoting behaviors to suit the needs of refugee youth, aiming to cultivate and sustain healthy mental well-being among this population.

In creating a program to support refugee youth, it's important to acknowledge and address the lack of specialized resources in their communities (Saxena & Ommeren, 2017). This means there is a need for interventions that anyone can administer, even if they're not experts, to help bridge this gap (Saxena & Ommeren, 2017). For a school system that serves refugee youth, one way to do this is by providing an intervention in schools that are presented to all students by teachers. This approach may be effective in reducing the stigma often associated with mental health support in these communities (Helping Adolescents Thrive Toolkit, 2021). By presenting

interventions within the school setting, we can foster an environment where mental health discussions are normalized and participation is encouraged among all youth.

Interventions for refugee youth in the school system need to be tailored to meet their unique needs, which includes engagement and literacy. To increase interest and participation in the learning process, interventions should actively involve students in discussions (Charbonneau et al., 2021). Since many refugee youth in the United States are English Language Learners, it's important to explain concepts in simple terms that everyone can understand and to ensure that the instructional material is clear but not oversimplified to the point that the meaning is lost (Early Adolescent Skills for Emotions (EASE), 2023). In this context, the instructor plays an important role in aiding student learning and understanding (EASE, 2023).

The purpose of this capstone project aimed to address the following question: How can a five-week psychosocial and life skills program focused on promoting the mental wellness of refugee adolescents be implemented at Georgia Fugees Academy Charter School (GFACS)? After conducting a review of existing literature on mental health interventions for both refugee youth and non-displaced youth, as well as through informal interviews with GFACS staff, it became evident that a program model emphasizing the promotion of mental health for all students would be most beneficial for refugee youth at GFACS.

By creating instructional lessons that emphasize evidence-based strategies to improve psychosocial and life skills, such as social-emotional skill development, stress management, and creative self-expression, there exists a promising avenue to address the occupational health issues prevalent in this vulnerable population. The purpose of this capstone was to develop a psycho-social and life skills program for refugee adolescents at Georgia Fugees Academy Charter School. The aim of this project was to create a psychosocial and life skills program

addressing communication and relationships, organization and time management, stress management, habits and health promotion, and creative self-expression.

Needs Assessment

An informal needs assessment was conducted through an informal interview of staff members at GFACS. This needs assessment was formalized into a SWOT Analysis showcasing the strengths, weakness, threats, and opportunities for occupational therapy program development within the school. GFACS exhibits several notable strengths in its approach to supporting refugee adolescents. GFACS consists of approximately 185 refugee and immigrant students who are of middle and high school age. The school boasts a positive history of catering to the needs of this demographic, fostering an inclusive educational atmosphere. The faculty and staff stand out for their unwavering dedication and cultural humility, aligning with the Fugees model, which emphasizes the advantages derived from internal staff diversity and understanding. The school actively celebrates cultural diversity, valuing and respecting the rich traditions, history, and beliefs of its students. Particularly, staff members who are considered "coaches," serve as essential points of contact for refugee families by bridging language barriers and facilitating communication. Furthermore, the school provides invaluable specialized support through informal mentorship and emotional guidance, with faculty members forming close relationships with students, conducting home visits, and gaining insights into their communities and personal backgrounds beyond academic contexts. The school also offers a diverse array of extracurricular activities including yoga, martial arts, and soccer, which all students actively participate in. These activities foster a strong sense of inclusion, teamwork, and belonging within the school community.

However, GFACS faces several challenges amidst its strengths. The institution is currently in a transitional phase from a private to a charter school, resulting in increased administrative paperwork and responsibilities, impacting faculty members. Additionally,

ongoing construction at the main school site due to the transition to a new building disrupts the learning environment and daily routines of students. The absence of an occupational therapist (OT) on staff also limits access to specialized services for students who could benefit from such support. Moreover, staff members noted that GFACS does not currently have a counselor. This limits students' access to a trained professional to assist adolescents with emerging emotional challenges and major life events. It was also noted that students struggled with communication, relationship-building, organization, time management, healthy habits, and stress-navigation. In the absence of a counselor, an occupational therapy program tailored to these challenges can be crucial. Occupational therapists can play a transformative role in enhancing students' communication, relationships, organizational skills, time management, wellness practices, and stress coping mechanisms. Introducing such a program aligns with the school's commitment to holistic student support.

GFACS presents several promising opportunities to further support refugee students and families. Firstly, the school serves as a valuable community resource for this demographic, providing essential support and guidance. There exists potential to secure additional funding and grants specifically designated for refugee education initiatives, leveraging the school's history of being exclusively funded through grants before its transition to a public institution. Additionally, establishing partnerships with volunteer networks, schools, and community organizations can significantly enhance access to expertise and resources. Fugees Family has also launched an initiative coined the "Teranga Project" which aims to collaborate with public and charter schools to develop tailored newcomer programs for adolescent students (Fugees Family, 2023). Project Teranga actively seeks collaborators throughout the United States, aiming to either establish or enhance newcomer programs. The objective is to build long-lasting partnerships that bring about

transformative changes over multiple years, with a strong commitment to providing holistic education for refugee students (Fugees Family, 2023). These opportunities pave the way for student access to on-site personnel, including occupational therapists and counselors, that are available to address the diverse needs of refugee students.

However, GFACS also faces several threats that could potentially impede successful implementation of a psychosocial and life skills program. Changes in immigration policies and government support systems pose a significant threat, directly affecting the stability and well-being of refugee families and students within the school system. Educational challenges remain for students with limited or interrupted formal education (SLIFE), who may struggle to adapt to the school environment due to substantial learning gaps and multiple stress factors related to migration and language barriers (Hos, 2014). Moreover, socioeconomic factors, such as having limited access to resources and low household income, contribute to students feeling compelled to drop out of school to support their families. These factors contribute to a high absentee rate among students, stemming from a devaluation of education and the responsibility to care for parents or family. Advocating for refugee families is crucial in ensuring that refugee students and their families receive greater support so they can benefit from school system services and receive the holistic support they need for future success.

Methods

Study Setting and Design

This capstone project took place at Georgia Fugees Academy Charter School (GFACS). The study followed a cross-sectional phenomenological design using semi-structured interviews to gather feedback on the content and sustainability of psychosocial and life skills instructional lessons I developed. Interviews were held in classrooms at the school, ensuring privacy without other professionals or students nearby. Approval for this study was obtained from the Georgia State University Institutional Review Board (IRB), and participants provided written consent before participation.

Participants and Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria

Purposive sampling was utilized to identify three GFACS staff members to engage in a semi-structured interview. The number of participants was decided by the limitations in GFACS staff members that met inclusion and exclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria were 1) teacher or staff member at GFACS, (2) works with GFACS students of all grade levels, (3) has been working at GFACS for at least 3 months, (4) has promoted mental health of GFACS students (either formally or informally). The exclusion criteria were 1) staff members who did not interact with students daily, (2) staff members who did not work on-site at the GFACS Atlanta location.

Proposed Intervention

The proposed intervention consisted of a five-week program aimed at enhancing psychosocial and life skills among GFACS students, focusing on communication and relationships, organization and time management, stress management, habits and health

promotion, and creative self-expression. These topics were organized into weekly comprehensive instructional lessons developed into PowerPoint, intended for future delivery by GFACS staff members. These PowerPoints were developed by the researcher, a doctoral occupational therapy student, during a 14-week capstone experience within the GFACS school system. The program underwent continuous refinement through feedback from my mentor and other school staff members. Content for the instructional lessons was decided through extensive evidence-based research and informal discussions with GFACS staff members to ensure relevance and effectiveness in addressing student needs. (Refer to Appendix 1 for an example of an instructional lesson PowerPoint on stress management.)

Site Description

The mission at Georgia Fugees Academy Charter School, which is part of the overarching Fugees Family school system, is focused on providing holistic support and resources to refugee students and their families for successful integration into their new communities (Fugees Family, Inc., 2020). The population of GFACS primarily includes refugee and immigrant students that are middle school and high school age. Within the school, students speak over 22 different languages and come from diverse religious backgrounds. The majority of students are of a Muslim faith background.

The organization's goals encompass fostering self-sufficiency, celebrating cultural diversity, using soccer and the arts to promote personal growth, and providing family members with extensive support (Fugees Family, Inc., 2024). At GFACS, there is an emphasis on holistic English acquisition, soccer integration, and a healing-centered schooling method. English proficiency is integrated throughout the school day and within classrooms. Soccer is used to unify students and build social-emotional skills that are crucial for academic success. Moreover,

the school provides structured routines to address trauma and build self-esteem (Fugees Family, Inc., 2020). Staff members bring diverse expertise in areas such as education and special education, cultural humility, advocacy, and trauma-informed care. This project aligns with GFACS goals and mission through the goal of targeted psychosocial and life skills to support refugee students. This project addresses key needs identified within the student population and supports the organization's commitment to holistic support and empowerment for refugee populations.

Assessments

Semi-Structured Interviews

Informal interviews were conducted to evaluate the content, structure, and sustainability of the presentations within the school system. For five consecutive weeks, instructional lesson PowerPoints were distributed to all GFACS staff members via email. Before each interview, participants had access to the PowerPoints and reviewed at least one PowerPoint to refresh their memory and provide relevant feedback. In order to have access to the PowerPoints, internet connection and a GFACS email were required.

The semi-structured interview consisted of six open-ended questions which were developed by the researcher. These questions aimed to gather unbiased opinions on the content of the PowerPoints, suggestions for improvements, and insights into the sustainability of presenting these PowerPoints, including any limitations and additional resources needed. Each participant received the same questions to ensure consistency and methodological integrity.

Data Analysis

The researcher listened to and transcribed all three interviews using the Otter.ai app to ensure accuracy for data analysis. The researcher started with open coding which allowed common ideas to be identified. The researcher then performed axial coding to group these ideas into categories. Following axial coding, common themes were derived from these categories, to address overall insights and trends within the feedback provided by the participants. This methodological approach for qualitative analysis, guided by Williams and Moser (2019), helped the researcher thoroughly analyze the data and ensure accuracy and careful interpretation of the data.

Results

The results of the semi-structured interviews conducted with three staff members at GFACS provided valuable insights into the content, implementation, and sustainability of the psychosocial and life skills instructional lessons developed for the students. The instructional lesson PowerPoint presentations were developed throughout the course of the 14-week capstone experience with feedback being given throughout development from various GFACS staff members continually. All feedback from the semi-structured interviews were based on finalized versions of the PowerPoints. Data analysis revealed several key findings.

Themes

Themes were developed through thematic analysis and summarization of data collected from semi-structured interviews conducted as part of the assessment of the psychosocial and life skills program at GFACS. The analysis revealed important insights about the program's ability to meet the needs of the students through content and structure, the suggested implementation for the program, and the sustainability of the program for the future. Participants appreciated the comprehensive content of the instructional lesson PowerPoints but suggested adding topics like self-esteem and emotional intelligence. They recommended improving delivery by chunking content, using ELL-friendly language, and incorporating more student interaction. For implementation of the program, participants suggested integrating the topics into the school curriculum either within House (homeroom) or classroom curriculum. Despite potential limitations like language barriers and staff training needs, participants were optimistic about overcoming challenges and emphasized the importance of leveraging resources for program sustainability. This information is valuable for refining and improving the program to better meet the needs of GFACS students.

Theme 1: *Current topics are relevant and could benefit from including topics of self-awareness, self-esteem, and emotional intelligence, along with improved delivery methods to ensure clarity, accessibility, and cultural relevance.*

Instructional Lesson Topics

All three interview participants expressed the importance of the selected topics of communication and relationships, organization and time management, stress management, habits and health promotion, and creative self-expression for the GFACS student population, considering them necessary and appropriate. Particularly, one interviewer highlighted the significance of the "Communication and Relationship" topic, stressing its importance during adolescence, especially as students navigate intimate relationships. Suggestions for additional topics included self-awareness, self-esteem, and emotional intelligence. One participant emphasized the importance of addressing self-worth and emotional intelligence, especially for high school girls grappling with self-perception issues. Additionally, another interviewer recommended adding self-awareness to the topic list.

Optimizing Instructional Lesson Content

All participants agreed that the instructional lesson PowerPoints provided sufficient information. One participant cautioned against overloading PowerPoints and stated, “I think if you include too much information, you run the risk of losing engagement and understanding.” Two out of three participants found the language to be English Language Learner (ELL)-friendly and easy to understand. One participant recommended making the language more "kid-friendly" and advocated for dividing the content into shorter segments to enhance student engagement,

along with incorporating additional visuals. Moreover, another interviewer suggested increasing opportunities for interaction and feedback to further enhance student involvement and understanding.

Representation and Relevance

One participant recognized the cultural diversity among the student population and shared a common method used by teachers at GFACS, explaining, "the only way to be culturally relevant is to…pull a little bit from each student's culture based on who is in the class at the time." However, considering the school-wide scope of the instructional lesson, they believed the current presentations were culturally relevant enough. Additionally, two out of three participants stressed the importance of incorporating representative pictures for greater cultural relevance within PowerPoints. One participant further suggested including specific cultural aspects to ensure relevance for diverse student populations and emphasized the significance of gathering feedback from students to ensure culturally sensitive content.

Theme 2: *Findings emphasize an approach towards integrating mental health lessons into the school curriculum, along with adequate measures to address implementation challenges.*

Presentation Timing and Integration into Curriculum

All participants agreed that the best times for instructional lessons would be during House gatherings, similar to homeroom classes, at the start of the day as well as during specific classes. One participant suggested that delivering the lessons during the College and Career class would be most effective, while another proposed integrating them into physical activity classes like Yoga or Martial Arts. Additionally, two out of three participants recommended integrating

presentations into multiple courses to highlight the importance of mental health topics across various subjects.

Potential Limitations to Implementation

Participants provided insightful and diverse perspectives when discussing potential limitations to implementing the instructional lessons at GFACS. One participant emphasized the importance of addressing challenges related to language translation to ensure accessibility for all students. Another participant highlighted the need for staff training and addressed challenges associated with implementing new initiatives amidst organizational changes. Additionally, one participant emphasized the importance of considering community triggers for mental health topics and navigating potential sensitivities. The participant discussed past challenges with efforts that used language such as "counseling" or "therapy" that were of significant concern for various families at GFACS. Specifically, they noted that while high school students at GFACS demonstrate greater openness towards mental health terminology, middle school students would feel more discomfort in going against cultural norms regarding mental health within their families.

Theme 3*: The sustainability strategy for the program involves utilizing technology, engaging professional expertise, and securing external funding to support social-emotional learning initiatives.*

Leveraging Technology

Two of the participants stressed the importance of integrating technology for enhanced effectiveness and student engagement. One recommended employing software for language

translation in all instructional lesson PowerPoint presentations. Another participant suggested providing accessible technological resources for students to access on their phones after the presentation. They proposed, "giving them a link to something that talks about it…or like an app that helps them [put it in practice]."

Involvement of External Professionals or Funding

One participant advocated for the involvement of medical professionals to provide expertise and support in addressing mental health topics. They suggested the addition of a health course led by a healthcare professional, allowing for expert-led discussions tailored to small classroom settings. Another participant highlighted the role of external funding in supporting social-emotional learning initiatives and resource development. They emphasized that funding from external sources would enable GFACS to focus on non-curricular topics such as social-emotional learning in their lesson plans, thus providing greater freedom and flexibility in teaching.

Discussion

Key Findings

The findings from the semi-structured interviews conducted with staff members at GFACS provide valuable insights into the development, implementation, and sustainability of an occupation-based psychosocial and life skills program for students. This program aligns with the principles of OT, particularly in promoting holistic well-being and encouraging participation in meaningful activities (Occupational Therapy Practice Framework, 2020). Within the interviews, participants emphasized the importance of the chosen topics of communication and relationships, organization, stress management, habits and health promotion, and creative self-expression for GFACS students along with additional themes of self-awareness, self-esteem, and emotional intelligence. They suggested optimizing instructional lesson content by ensuring ELL friendly language, incorporating visuals, and enhancing student engagement and cultural relevance through interaction and feedback. Instructional lesson presentations were deemed most likely to be effective during House (homeroom) periods and across various classes, though challenges like language barriers, staff training needs, and community sensitivities were acknowledged. To ensure sustainability, suggestions included using technology, involving medical professionals, and seeking external funding.

Relevant Topics and Delivery Methods

By incorporating mental wellness topics, the five-week psychosocial and life skills program aims to enhance students' occupational functioning and overall quality of life (Arbesman, 2013). Participants highlighted the importance of additional themes, including self-esteem, self-awareness, and emotional intelligence, as well as improvements in delivery methods, as key factors in optimizing the psychosocial and life skills program. Particularly, they

emphasized the importance of these topics for high school girls dealing with self-perception issues. Called "selfhood development," these themes refer to navigating one's own identity, which involves a dynamic interplay of thoughts, feelings, and actions (Yeo et al., 2023). While research on self-awareness among refugee teens remains limited, a meta-analysis focused on adolescents demonstrates that heightened self-esteem, self-compassion, self-awareness, self-efficacy, and self-regulation correlate with reduced symptoms of depression (Yeo et al., 2023). This GFACS staff feedback finds further support in the refugee population through research by Kateri et al. (2021), which highlights the cross-cultural significance of improved self-esteem as a protective factor against symptoms of anxiety and depression.

Using language suitable for English Language Learners (ELL) is important for ensuring that refugee adolescents can engage with and understand the material effectively (EASE, 2023). While most participants found the instructional lesson PowerPoints to be ELL-friendly, one participant suggested simplifying the information further and adding more visuals to increase student engagement. This could involve reducing the amount of content on each slide to make the material easier to understand (Northern Illinois University, 2020). It could also involve adding more visuals, highlighted terms, and bold font (Northern Illinois University, 2020). However, it's important to strike a balance between simplification and maintaining the integrity of the information, which is why having a knowledgeable instructor available for student questions is encouraged (EASE, 2023).

Cultural Sensitivity and Representation

Cultural norms and beliefs regarding mental health can greatly differ among various ethnic and cultural groups, influencing the acceptance of mental health programs (Kira et al., 2014). It's essential for presenters of the program to understand and respect these cultural nuances to prevent unintentional distress or resistance among refugee students and their families. To address these differences effectively, the program should use a nuanced approach to mental health education and support that recognizes and respects cultural differences (Jahed, 2023).

Participants recognized the cultural diversity within the student population and emphasized the importance of cultural relevance in the presentation content. Participants acknowledged the challenges of creating school-wide presentations catering to diverse cultural backgrounds, but advised adding visuals that are representative and include cultural elements. One way of ensuring cross-cultural learning is by delivering educational presentations in a mutual-learning environment where people from various cultural backgrounds have open discussion and learn from each other (Im & Swan, 2022). This highlights the importance of ongoing feedback from students to ensure culturally-sensitive content, as mentioned by one participant. It's also essential for instructors to show cultural humility during these discussions, as highlighted by Jahed (2023). When working with refugee populations, professionals should avoid seeing refugees as needing "rescue" and focus on providing care with cultural humility. This approach promotes openness and portrays mental wellness programs positively (Jahed, 2023).

One participant also noted challenges in implementing mental health interventions, citing discomfort with terms like "therapy" or "counseling" among middle school students and certain family members at GFACS. Modifying instructional lesson PowerPoints to utilize less therapeutic terms encourages acceptance of the material presented as well as helping mitigate

potential discomfort among younger students and their families (Helping Adolescents Thrive Toolkit, 2021). This may involve reframing mental health terminology to align with culturally-accepted language and values, as well as providing culturally-sensitive resources and interventions. The delivery of this psychosocial and life skills program should use language emphasizing promotion of occupational and mental well-being.

Implementation

Current challenges the school faces in implementing a school-wide program may hinder the success of the psychosocial and life skills program. One participant emphasized the importance of addressing challenges related to language translation to establish accessibility for all students. This highlights the need to accommodate students with diverse linguistic backgrounds to ensure that language barriers do not hinder the access to the material. As mentioned by one participant, staff training of material requires considerable time and resources (Bennouna et al., 2019), which are difficult to allocate amidst organizational changes at GFACS. Successfully integrating a school-wide program involves providing educators with training that is supported by consistent investment from school leadership and strategic planning (Bennouna et al., 2019). Amid ongoing organizational shifts, there may be a need to rely on external resources, such as colleges or volunteers, for program implementation or target specific classes where educational presentations can seamlessly fit into existing curricular activities.

The consensus among participants regarding the best times for educational lessons as part of the psychosocial and life skills program was to incorporate them during House gatherings, specific classes like College and Career, or physical activity classes. By incorporating educational lessons into a consistent time of the school day, presenters of the program can ensure that students receive consistent exposure to important mental wellness concepts, reinforcing their

understanding and promoting positive occupational habits. Although originally proposed as a 5-week program, for optimal exposure and simplified comprehension, it is suggested that the instructional lessons be broken up into an 8-12 week program (Bennouna et al., 2019) that is presented within House or relevant classes throughout the semester. The proposed approach aims to foster sustained student engagement and address potential implementation challenges, such as language barriers and staff training needs.

Sustainability Strategies

Sustainability is crucial for ensuring the long-term effectiveness and integration of a psychosocial and life skills program at GFACS. Sustainability strategies for the psychosocial and life skills program can include leveraging technology, engaging professional expertise, and securing external funding. One participant suggested that the integration of technology, such as language translation software, can enhance the effectiveness of the program. Having staff members from similar cultural or linguistic backgrounds present during discussions can also aid in language translation and cultural understanding (Bennouna et al., 2019). Moreover, adding resources such as apps or websites can promote engagement and active student participation (ACTFL, 2017). One participant observed that students at GFACS often search additional resources on their phones or utilize recommended apps.

Involving external professionals, such as an occupational therapist, other medical professional, or a counselor, can provide valuable support in addressing mental wellness topics at GFACS (Bennouna et al., 2019). These professionals offer specialized knowledge that can enhance the effectiveness of psychosocial and life skill interventions. One participant suggested a dedicated health teacher or other professional focused on integrating socio-emotional learning topics within the school system to offer tailored support to students. Partnerships from external

organizations such as colleges can offer an avenue to gain support and resources at little cost and with less need for GFACS staff training.

Additionally, external funding can ensure the sustainability of this program. By securing external funding, GFACS can expand its resources and ability to present this psychosocial and life skills program. Being bound by curriculum also limits the capacity of teachers to set aside additional time for non-curricular topics (Bennouna et al., 2019). One participant mentioned that external funding would enable them to be more flexible with their curriculum, allowing for the integration of socio-emotional learning within their classrooms.

Limitations

Several factors should be considered when analyzing the findings of the semi-structured interviews. The number of participants was limited to three staff members which narrows the scope of the findings. It's also important to recognize that some participants may have formed connections with the researcher throughout the capstone project, which could have influenced their responses to lean towards positivity. Additionally, limitations in distributing the instructional lesson PowerPoints via email resulted in certain teachers being left out of emails, potentially affecting their familiarity with the material. There may have also been instances of recall bias, where participants inaccurately remembered aspects of the instructional lesson PowerPoints during the interviews. These considerations emphasize the need for careful interpretation of the interview data and highlight areas for improvement in future research methodologies.

Future Research

Limitations point to the need for future studies with more participants and feedback. Increasing the number of participants could allow a more comprehensive perspective on the effectiveness, implementation, and sustainability of the program. Efforts can also be directed toward ensuring that all staff members have equal access to program materials, utilizing physical or other online distribution platforms. To mitigate recall bias, distributing program materials closer to interview dates or conducting material reviews before interviews could be beneficial.

Future research could explore implementation of the program. Researchers could collect data on the impact of these interventions on student outcomes, such as social-emotional development, and overall occupational well-being. Longitudinal studies could examine the long-term effects of integrating psychosocial interventions into the school curriculum. Additionally, comparative studies across different refugee schools could provide greater insight for supporting refugee adolescent student populations. The findings from this study have several implications for OT practice including the prioritization of culturally-sensitive approaches and the need for language translation to accommodate diverse linguistic populations. Additionally, it highlights the importance of integrating mental wellness topics into Tier 1 interventions at schools serving refugee students to promote holistic well-being. Future occupational therapy research can use the insights gained to refine and improve the psychosocial and life skills program, ensuring that it meets the diverse needs of schools serving refugee students.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews conducted to evaluate the psychosocial and life skills program at GFACS has revealed valuable insights for program optimization and effectiveness. Participants highlighted the program's strengths in delivering comprehensive content through instructional lesson PowerPoint presentations while offering suggestions for improvement in relevance, delivery, and integration into the school curriculum. The findings highlighted the importance of addressing additional themes such as self-awareness, self-esteem, and emotional intelligence, alongside culturally sensitive and engaging delivery methods. Despite challenges such as language barriers and staff training needs, participants emphasized the importance of leveraging resources for program sustainability. The incorporation of a psychosocial and life skills program within the school has potential for enhancing refugee students occupational functioning and overall quality of life. To address limitations identified, future research should focus on larger participant pools and ensure access to the material. Longitudinal and comparative studies can focus on the exploration of long-term impacts across different refugee students and school systems. These findings provide insights to refine and improve psychosocial and life skills programs to better meet the diverse needs of schools serving refugee students, thereby informing future occupational therapy practice in this area.

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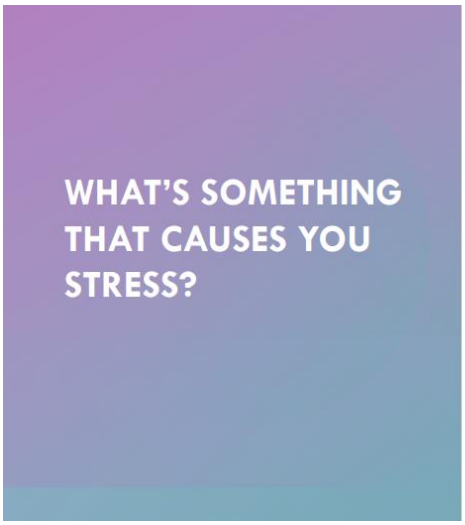
Appendix 1: Stress Management Instructional Lesson Powerpoint

THINGS THAT MAY BE GIVING YOU STRESS

- Unfair treatment
- Finances (jobs or money)
- Language barriers
- Loneliness (loss of community)
- Difficulty in getting school help, social services, and health services
- Visa/Asylum Applications



EMOTIONS

- Your emotions are what make you human. We all feel cheerfulness, anger, sadness, excitement, etc. as we go through life.
- Having emotions are never a bad thing but what you do with your emotion can be good or bad.
  - *Learning how to express emotion in a healthy way is a skill that we learn.*
  - *Showing emotions in a bad way can cause you or people around you to be hurt*
    - *Ex: Saying hurtful things when angry*
    - *Ex: Feeling scared and staying home so you miss out on fun events*

WHY DO YOUR EMOTIONS CHANGE SO FAST?

- At your age, you may be going through a lot of body changes that can affect how you feel about yourself
- Your brain is changing, making emotions bigger and feel more strong
- Having new problems with family, friends, and relationships can affect your emotions
- You can be going through different situations that make you have big emotions

1.UNDERSTAND YOUR FEELINGS

- Noticing your feelings instead of avoiding them can help you accept how you are feeling and move on from the emotion.
- When a situation happens, pause and name the emotion it made you feel
  - *Ex: You have an exam tomorrow and you pause and take a minute to notice that you are feeling nervous.*

1. UNDERSTAND YOUR FEELINGS

- Once you know what feeling you are having, figure out why.
  - *Ex: "I am nervous about my test because if I don't do well my parents will be mad." "No wonder I feel nervous, its normal to feel this way."*
- Don't get mad at yourself for having the emotion. Accept your emotion and know that it is OK to feel them.

2. CALM YOUR BODY

- Once you understand your feelings of stress or anxiety, calm down your body using "***deep breathing***."
- **Deep breathing** means taking a deep breath in for 3 seconds and then a breath out for 3 seconds. Purse your lips like you're blowing out a candle when you breathe out.
- There is no perfect way to do it, just focus on slowing down your breathing!

LET'S PRACTICE!

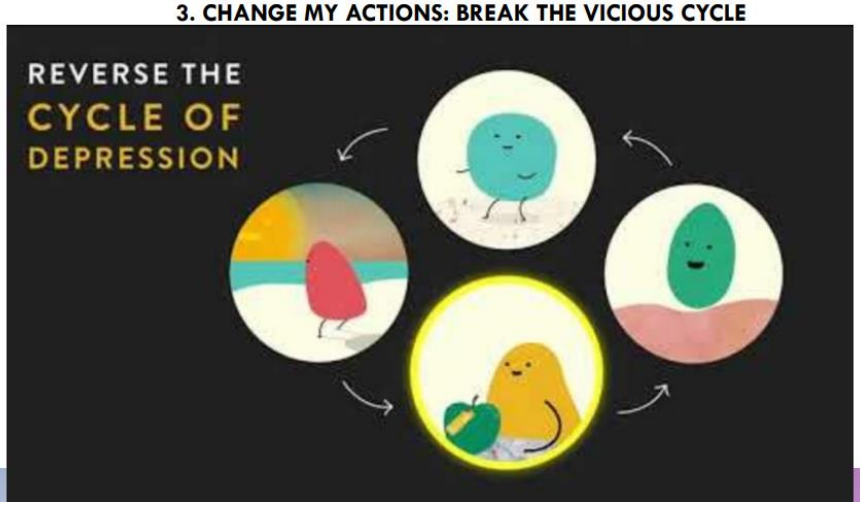
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KssedxpbLpg

2. OTHER WAYS TO CALM YOUR BODY

- If you find deep breathing difficult you can also:
  - ***Listen to relaxing music***
  - ***Take a long, slow walk***
  - ***Yoga***
  - "***Shake It Off***" start by shaking your left foot, then right foot, each leg, hips, chest, shoulders, arms, hands, and then head

WHAT HELPS YOU CALM YOUR BODY DOWN?

3. CHANGE MY ACTIONS: BREAK THE VICIOUS CYCLE



https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WM3DeD4ix10

3. CHANGE MY ACTIONS

- When you're feeling bad or stressed, it can be easy to choose to stay in your room or be on your phone.
- Part of feeling better is choosing something you want to do and taking steps to make it happen.

3. CHANGE MY ACTIONS

Step One: Choose an activity you want to do:

- Physical (sports or games)
- Social activities (spending more time with someone)
- Individual hobbies (singing)
- Learning a new skill (drawing)
- Doing an important task (like homework)

3. CHANGE MY ACTIONS

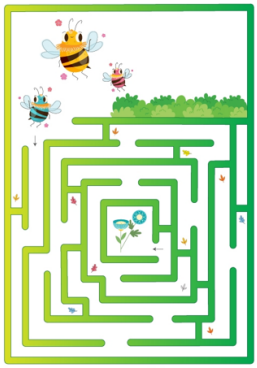
- **Step Two:** Break down the activity into steps
  - *These can be small steps. Ex: drawing for 5 minutes a day or 2x/week*
- **Step Three:** Plan ***when*** you will do these steps
- **Step Four:** Repeat the smaller steps as many times as you need before going on to the next big step

4. MANAGE MY PROBLEMS

- Having big emotions can make it difficult to think clearly. If you can't think clearly, it can be hard to take care of everyday problems or big problems like:
  - *Fights with a sibling, grades, bullying, etc.*
- Not all problem are easy to solve, so start with the ones that might be easier.

4. THINK OF A MAZE

- In order to get through the maze, you need to try different paths before you find the exit.
- When we try to solve our problems, we can try many different solutions before we find the one that works.
- Don't stop trying when one solution doesn't work out.

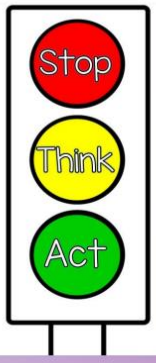


4. MANAGE MY PROBLEMS

- Remember, don't try to solve other people's problems like:
  - Changing other's behavior, caregivers fighting, other's mental health, family financial problems, caregiver's unemployment, problems in the community such as poverty or violence.
- In this case, know that these problems are outside of your control and focus on things you can do to manage your own stress.

4. STOP, THINK, AND ACT

- This takes practice.
- Remind yourself daily of these steps or write them down in a place you see everyday to constantly remind yourself.



STOP.
- Identify how you are feeling
- Why?
- Calm down - Use a coping tool if needed

THINK.
- What is the Size of the Problem? Does my reaction match?
- Is this In or Out of My control?
- Am I being a Flexible Thinker?
- How can I solve this problem?

ACT.
- Solve the problem- ask for help if needed
- Be A Flexible Thinker
- Make sure your reaction is matching the size of the problem

Function Focused OT

Group Discussion

I WANT ONE PERSON TO SHARE A SIMPLE PROBLEM THEY FEEL COMFORTABLE SHARING (OR MAKE ONE UP).

LET'S ALL TAKE A MINUTE TO THINK OF SOLUTIONS AND SHARE THEM. THERE ARE NO RIGHT OR WRONG SOLUTIONS.

CHOOSE ONE SOLUTION OUT OF ALL THE ONES YOU SHARED.

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