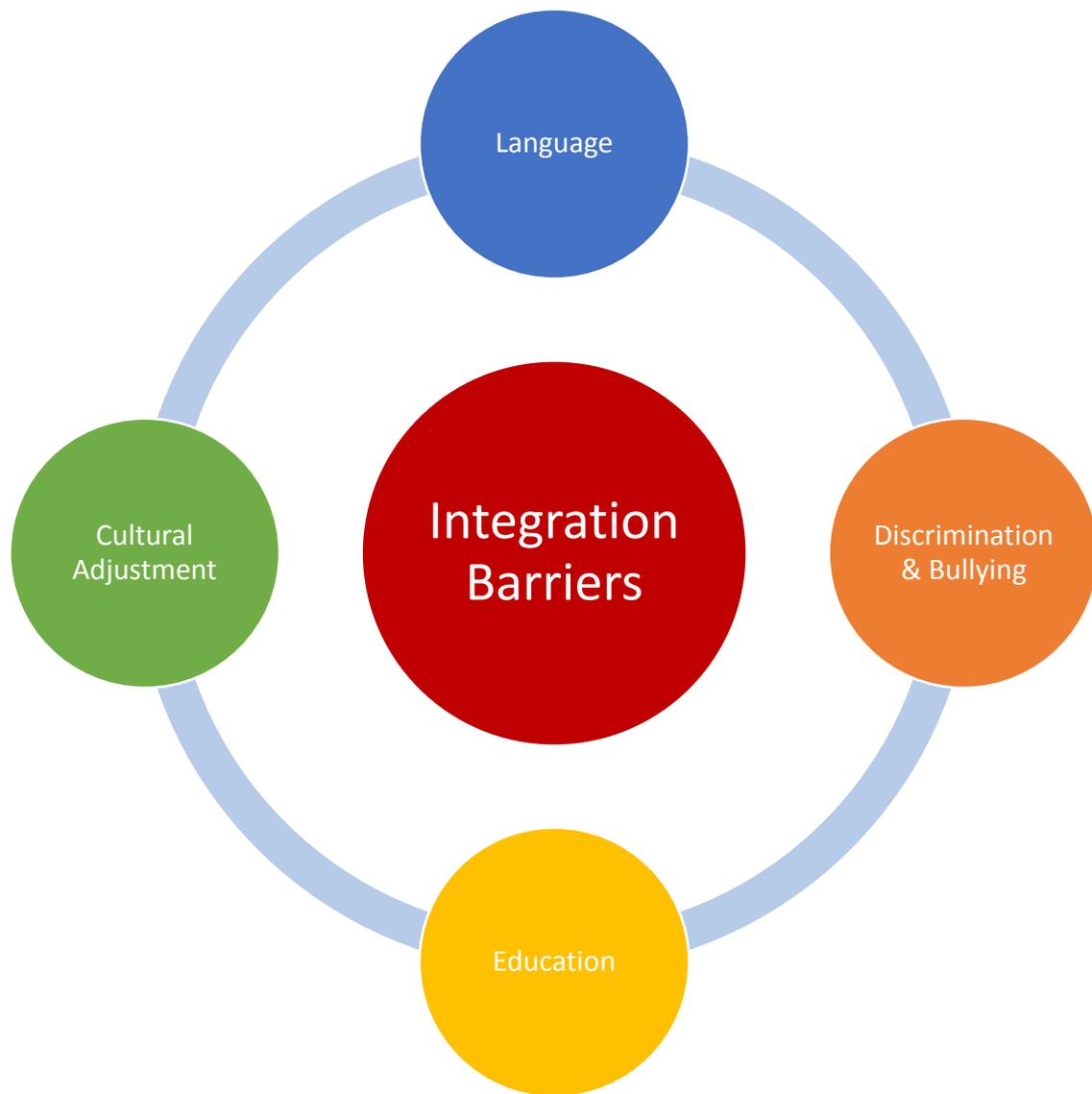


Integration Barriers: Perspectives from Refugee Youth

In February 2016, 25 refugee youth gathered in Washington, DC to identify and discuss the biggest barriers they face adjusting to life in America. They analyzed the causes and impacts of each barrier and then discussed what could be done to fix them. Solutions ranged from what can be done better overseas in refugee camps to what can be done here by schools and local communities. These barriers, causes, impacts, and solutions all came from the refugee youth themselves. Please take a moment to better understand the challenges young refugees face and what you can do to help.



PROBLEM

Language barriers are a serious challenge faced by many refugees. They often create misunderstandings and can make refugees feel isolated.



CAUSES

One major cause is refugees' prior English education or lack thereof. Many times refugees are not given enough time or the opportunity to learn English before they come to the U.S. If there are English classes in the refugee camps, they are not focused on young refugees and there is very little support or follow through with these classes. Another cause is the lack of opportunity to practice English in a safe and judgment free zone. Refugees are often intimidated and scared to use English. Many young refugees have reported being made fun of when they struggle with the language, which then disincentives them to practice. They oftentimes cannot practice English in the privacy of their homes because their family members do not speak it either.



IMPACT

Language barriers can make refugees feel isolated, hopeless, and anti-social, which often leads to depression. Struggling with speaking and comprehension makes it difficult for refugees to make friends with American peers and can unfortunately make them a target for bullying. It also leads to a lack of confidence, inhibiting many from speaking up and participating in class, and ultimately missed job and educational opportunities. Young refugees are impacted by their parent's language barrier as well. If their parents struggle with English, the children often have to serve as an interpreters and take on more responsibility at home.



SOLUTIONS

Schools can institute a mentoring program for refugees where they partner with an American student to practice English. They can also use summer school as a time to teach English and increase proficiency. Schools can also make ESL classes more activity-based and offer them more than once a day.

Refugee agencies that run camps can start English classes at an early age, have English classes that focus on teaching youth, and ensure that pronunciation is taught in these classes. They can also help refugees find English classes while they are waiting for resettlement.

Communities and refugee resettlement agencies can organize special events/ networking events to promote integration. They can also encourage youth to join soccer teams and other activities that would allow youth to practice English in a pressure free setting.

PROBLEM

Refugee youth deal with discrimination and bullying almost every day in all aspects of life. Discrimination dampens the spirit. It affects refugees emotionally and mentally and keeps them from reaching their full potential and achieving the American dream. Discrimination and bullying is the biggest and most negative issue refugees face.



CAUSES

Many of the causes for the discrimination and bullying refugees encounter are American citizens and society. Sadly, some Americans lack knowledge or awareness in general about refugees and the resettlement process, and therefore have a fear of newcomers which can lead them to hate other cultures. Lately, these fears have been perpetuated by the media. Another major cause of discrimination and bullying is racism. Some Americans look down on refugees because of their skin color and background. Refugees are also discriminated against and bullied because they may wear different clothing, eat different food, practice a different religion, struggle with understanding and speaking English, and have a different culture and customs.



IMPACT

Discrimination and bullying can make refugees feel isolated, fearful, lonely, powerless, and reduces their confidence which can lead to depression and self-harming/suicidal behaviors. Discrimination and bullying pressures refugees to try hard to fit in. This means they give into peer pressure and participate in activities they do not want to, including gang involvement and substance abuse. By giving into peer pressure and trying to fit in, a refugee can easily lose their past and culture, and create strife and cultural divides within their own family and community. When the discrimination and bullying in school is very severe, it makes young refugees drop out and impacts the rest of their lives.



SOLUTIONS

Schools can create bullying prevention programs, educate teachers and counselors about bullying directed at refugees, and create mentorship programs that partner American and refugee students. They can also have an after-school program that teaches all students to stand up for themselves and others and teaches self-confidence, self-respect and self-love.

Refugee resettlement agencies can teach refugee parents about bullying and show them how they can support their children. They should encourage biculturalism and civic engagement, showing refugee families programs in the community they can get involved in.

Organizations that work in refugee camps can teach refugees about bullying prior to their arrival. They can also have cultural orientation classes in refugee camps that teach American culture and cover things like slang terms.

Americans can learn about other cultures, religions, and backgrounds and try to see the value in these differences. The media can promote anti-discrimination and anti-bullying rhetoric in their stories.

PROBLEM

Education is essential for the success of refugee youth, but when they arrive in a new country they feel like they are starting their education over again. Many refugees struggle with the American education system upon arrival.



CAUSES

One reason refugees struggle with the American education system is that teachers and school personnel have a limited understanding of the unique needs of refugees. There are no educational plans developed to address and deal specifically with refugee students. Another major cause is the inherent differences in the education systems overseas. Refugees are not familiar with or prepared for standardized testing. It is also difficult to obtain official school records, which can interfere with enrollment and grade placement. Sometimes refugees do not have access to education for years in the camp and are placed in a grade level that does not correspond to their learning level. Additionally, language barriers limit how much a student can learn, their educational opportunities and progress.



IMPACT

Struggling with the American education system affects refugees in many ways. Some refugees do poorly and get bad grades for the first few years. Because they struggle to succeed and do well in school, they have less job opportunities and miss out on other opportunities, such as college, scholarships, and internships. This makes it difficult to support their families. Doing poorly in school can make refugees feel discouraged, frustrated, depressed, hopeless, and lose interest in their studies. This lack of interest can lead them to drop out or become involved in gangs, drugs, and other risky behaviors. Refugees struggling with their education tend to not graduate on time and aren't likely to participate in school activities.



SOLUTIONS

Schools can work to increase communication between schools (i.e. middle school and elementary school) so the new school can be made aware of a student's unique needs. They can translate school materials and educate teachers on the needs of refugees, offer refugee specific guidance counseling, and summer orientation sessions to help with the transition. They can also increase after-school programming and tutoring, as well as parent involvement initiatives.

Organizations that work in refugee camps can make sure to educate youth and parents about the American school system before they arrive.

Refugee resettlement agencies can offer a support system for newcomer families, educating them on the American school system and the importance of parent involvement. They can also educate parents on financial resources, such as scholarships for private high school and college.

There needs to be a paradigm shift from assisting refugees to quickly become self-sufficient to assisting refugees to meet and discover their full potential. A cultural understanding when interpreting/evaluating transcripts is needed to institute better testing that will result in more accurate and appropriate placement. Another potential solution is to develop educational programming for those over 18 years of age that includes GED certification.

PROBLEM

Cultural adjustment is complicated for refugees. Adjusting to a new culture can be a difficult challenge for refugees to accept. If they do accept this new culture and begin to re-establish and find an identity it becomes challenging to keep everyone in both cultures happy. Yet, a lack of cultural adjustment limits communication, acceptance, and inclusion.



CAUSES

One of the main causes that makes cultural adjustment so difficult for refugees is that everything is different and new in the U.S. Refugees often come to the U.S. with idealistic expectations and reality can be disappointing. It is challenging to adapt to a new home, climate, and customs, and can make a person feel like they don't belong anywhere. Additionally, most young refugees' families do not want them to completely forget their native culture in order to fit into American society. It is challenging to find balance with new and old culture and this dichotomy makes it difficult to adjust to their new life. If they stay in their own community too much and don't get involved in their new town and school, it makes adjusting to the new culture almost impossible. Another factor that makes cultural adjustment a barrier for refugees, is that some Americans do not want to let refugees into their culture and world. Media stories influence and enforce stereotypes of refugees.



IMPACT

Struggling with cultural adjustment can make refugees feel isolated, pressured, depressed, and intimidated. The intimidation and fear of this new culture can make them not want to participate in school, activities, and the community. If they do not adapt well, they are often discriminated against and bullied for being different. The peer pressure to fit in and adjust can make them change their values or beliefs and participate in risky behaviors. For some, it means deculturation and completely trading their native culture for American culture because they can't find a balance. In turn, if they are accepted into this new culture, they might be considered a traitor in their native culture, which leads to family conflict and tension. Cultural adjustment can lead to a loss of identity. Refugee youth can become insecure and unstable and unsure of who they are. This leads to difficulty in decision making. It is difficult to know which way of living is the right one.



SOLUTIONS

Schools can promote bilculturalism and offer peer-to-peer cultural exchanges, like an American friend program.

Organizations that work in refugee camps can improve orientation prior to arrival so there is not as much culture shock upon arrival. Refugee resettlement agencies can give a more in-depth cultural orientation sessions or have one that is specifically geared towards refugee youth. They can try to help with inter-generational challenges that arise from adjusting and assimilating to a new culture. They can encourage refugees to get involved in the community as well as local cultural and ethnic community-based organizations so they can adjust to their new culture while practicing their native traditions.

The media can send positive messages about refugees and resettlement. American citizens can learn about different cultures and work on accepting these differences. Communities and towns can host inter-faith celebrations and have cultural festivals to encourage acceptance and integration.