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DPP 902
Introductory Paper
January 30, 2017

New Hampshire has welcomed 3,763 refugees from 21 different countries since 2009 (Office of Health Equity, 2017). The majority of these have resettled in the city of Manchester. Formerly known as a textile-manufacturing center, Manchester has partially reinvented itself into a high tech R&D hub. The former mill city is now home to companies such as Autodesk, RoboticsFirst, and Dean Kamen's DEKA as well as two university campuses, a community college, and an art school.

The city has not benefitted evenly from the transformation however. Across the river and in the shadows of the two new sports stadiums, the city has residential neighborhoods where crime and poverty are rampant. It is an area that is particularly hard hit by the opioid addiction crisis. In the decades since the mills departed for cheaper locales, incomes and opportunities have dwindled for those lacking formal education and certain skills. Due to a combination of cheap rents and availability of social services nearby, these are often the neighborhoods that the refugees are being resettled in.

A report produced by the University of New Hampshire on refugee resettlement noted that while the Granite State generally had a high per capita income, it offered very few social supports or services particularly those related to employment and education (Schiller, 2006, p. 3, 7). The report also stressed that learning English was a priority for refugees (p. 28), but made the point that there is no formal department or agency to assist with that goal (p.16). Refugees are offered some basic help with learning English, but the report described it as being very basic and noted that it didn't account for the education level of the refugees (p.13).

According to statistics released by the U.S. State Department in August 2016, 58 percent of the 8,000 Syrian refugees resettled so far are children (Goyette, 2016). While school-aged children will receive specialized English instruction to help them learn with the rest of their peers, younger children, along with their parents, are often left without the opportunity to learn the basic vocabulary terms that would help clear a pathway to fuller inclusion.

My project seeks to create an ongoing free multi-lingual library program for children ages birth through five years and their parent or primary caregiver. The program would offer early literacy activities and would be designed to meet the information needs of both adult and child. The participants would be a mix of refugees, recent immigrants and longer-term residents to give new families the opportunity to connect with ones who are more established. There is a lot to be gained by the residents of the city of Manchester to learn their neighbor's language and culture. Having these connections will ultimately create stronger, more unified communities.

Specifically classes could include parent-led sessions to teach simple vocabulary terms for colors, numbers, letters, and holidays leading to language instruction for both groups. Many parents recognize the value of being multi-lingual and will seek out this type of experience. In addition, by learning the culture, folklore, and customs of the people in their community, children will grow up with a sense of inclusion, tolerance, and empathy.

It is observed that enrichment classes and library story hours are conducive to positive interactions between parents as well as children. In order for this format to be successful, participants will need to have some formal instruction in how to lead a group, and sessions will be mediated with library staff and parent volunteers. Practicing these skills with the group will help the parents, both refugee and long-term resident alike, to develop leadership skills and gain language fluency as they take part in leading some of the classes. There is a real need to empower the parents from both groups, some of whom are not engaged in work out side of the home, and are often not otherwise easily able to gain the skills that will lead to paid employment, or advancement at their current jobs.

Parental participation will actually be necessary, since most librarians and library workers are not multi-lingual. It would be impossible to do this project without either having the librarians become fluent in other languages or enlisting the parents. Involving the parents or caregivers is needed for logistical as well as goal-related reasons.

Quantifying progress for the children might be difficult to measure, as some refugee families will move to other neighborhoods once they can afford to do so. Furthermore studies have shown that refugees have less impact on the school system than other student populations in terms of specialized supports and services (Schiller, p. 7). Promisingly other studies have shown that programs, such as Head Start, which offers high quality preschool education to lower income children, has had long-term measurable success.

Measuring the benefit that this program has on the adults who participate might also be difficult to track since progress might not show up as enhanced labor participation, but rather as greater attainment in other life areas such as enhanced community involvement or better academic achievement for other children in the family. It might be helpful to compare the results to other type of leadership training programs.

This program aims to fulfill two basic objectives, to enhance school readiness by providing early learning opportunities for pre-school aged refugee children, and to assist their parents in developing the skills needed to participate economically as well as socially in their new communities.

Public libraries are in an excellent position to devise, review and implement programming that supports the needs of underserved populations. Finances remain a limiting factor almost everywhere however, and taxpayer-funded entities are increasingly called upon to pull their own weight. Therefore it is imperative that any proposed program or project carefully analyze all costs and be prepared to quantify projected outcomes.

Hopefully research will point to the feasibility, as well as the cost, of a grant-funded project to enable public libraries to offer programming that will support the early learning needs of young children, their parents or other caregivers by leveraging the great strength of cultural exchange.

References

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