

Exploring belonging: Experiences of refugee children and families in a Montreal recreational setting

Centre for Research on Children and Families

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CYRRRC



Child and Youth Refugee Research Coalition

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About CYRRC

Over 100 researchers and partners working together to address challenges and opportunities refugee children and youth experience in four areas:



Facilitating integration for children and families

- Montreal City Mission programs
 - Maa'n
 - Women Weaving Their Dreams
 - Camp Cosmos
 - History
 - Purpose

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eboXpEULJEA>

Research study

- Exploratory qualitative approach for pilot study
- Research questions:
 - How has participation in Camp Cosmos shaped experiences of social belonging for refugee children, youth, and parents?
 - How do refugee children, youth, and parents think about belonging?
 - In what ways do community organizations facilitate social integration for refugees?
- <https://youtu.be/JhZdogAKsQ8>

Literature

- There is very limited research on the sense of belonging held by refugee children and parents in early childhood educational and recreational settings.
- From a government resettlement perspective, integration is equivalent to economic self-sufficiency, particularly in a North American context (Ives, 2007).
- While economic participation is critical to integration, however, “there is also a strong desire to belong in a more emotional and culturally meaningful way, a desire which is blocked ... by experiences of exclusion by the mainstream population and cultural differences” (Fozdar & Hartley, 2013, p. 139).

Literature

- Belonging has been conceptualized as a sense of attachment to others and togetherness (Guo & Dalli, 2016); for refugees, this is the extent to which one feels like he or she is an accepted part of, that is, belongs to and in the new country. For refugee children, this creation of a sense of belonging in their new country typically happens when they participate in new educational contexts.
- Greater senses of belonging in schools has been found to be associated with lower depression and higher self-efficacy, regardless of the extent to which they have been exposed in to adversities in the past (Kia-Keating & Ellis, 2007).

Data collection methods

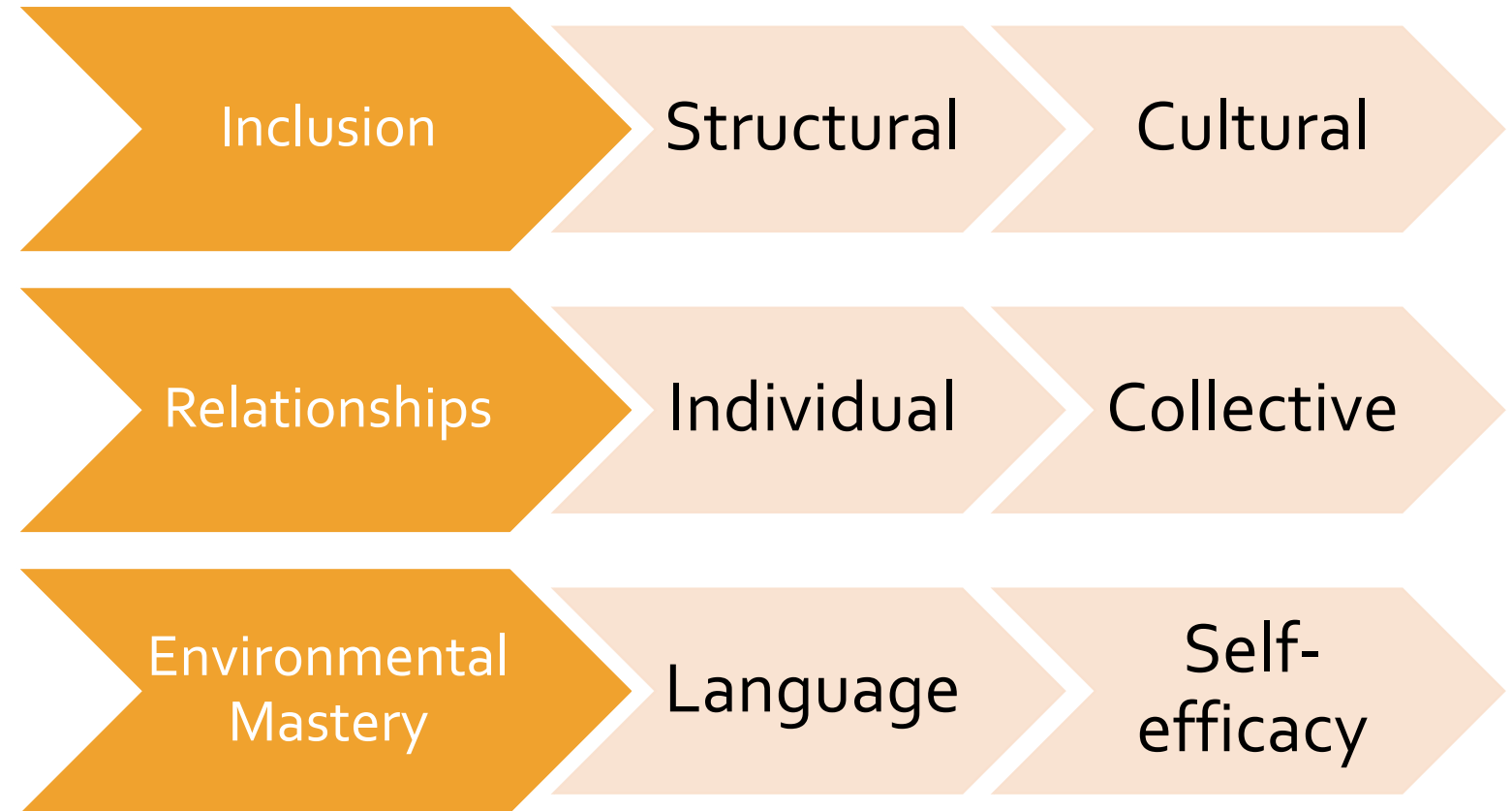


- **Interviews** with children before and after camp
- **Interviews** with parents before camp, focus group with parents after camp
- **Interviews** with staff and CIT after camp
- **Document review:** MCM annual reports, information about welcome classes

Participants

- Completed interviews with 24 participants:
 - 14 children (7 boys and 7 girls)
 - Ages ranged from 6-14 years old
 - 7 parents
 - All mothers from Syria and Palestine; aged 32-38
 - 2 staff members
 - 1 Counselor in Training
- All children and parents participating have lived in Montreal less than 3 years.
- 10 out of 14 children travelled through the USA to Canada
- 4 children arrived directly from Lebanon

Findings:
How does
camp
participation
shape
belonging?



Inclusion

- Organizational Structure

- Financial accessibility
- Location
- Staffing
 - *Hiring*
 - *Training*



- Organizational Culture
- Camp theme: "Unity/One Family"
 - Children
 - Parents

Inclusion

- **Staff member:** I think, in all what they do is just make people feel that they are connected, that they are almost one group of people. It's very hard to explain because it's a feeling. It's not something that I can put in words. It's like people feel so connected with each other, whether it is the parents with the staff or the staff with the kids. It's just this whole sense of Camp Cosmos community, while we only have 6 weeks with them. It's that sense of connection. [...] It's a very hard feeling to explain but it's that connection between everybody and anybody that is related to Camp Cosmos [...] It's really validating people's existence. You are here in front of me and I appreciate that you are here.

Relationships

- Individual:
 - Between campers (one on one)
 - Between campers and counselors
- Collective:
 - Among campers
 - Among staff



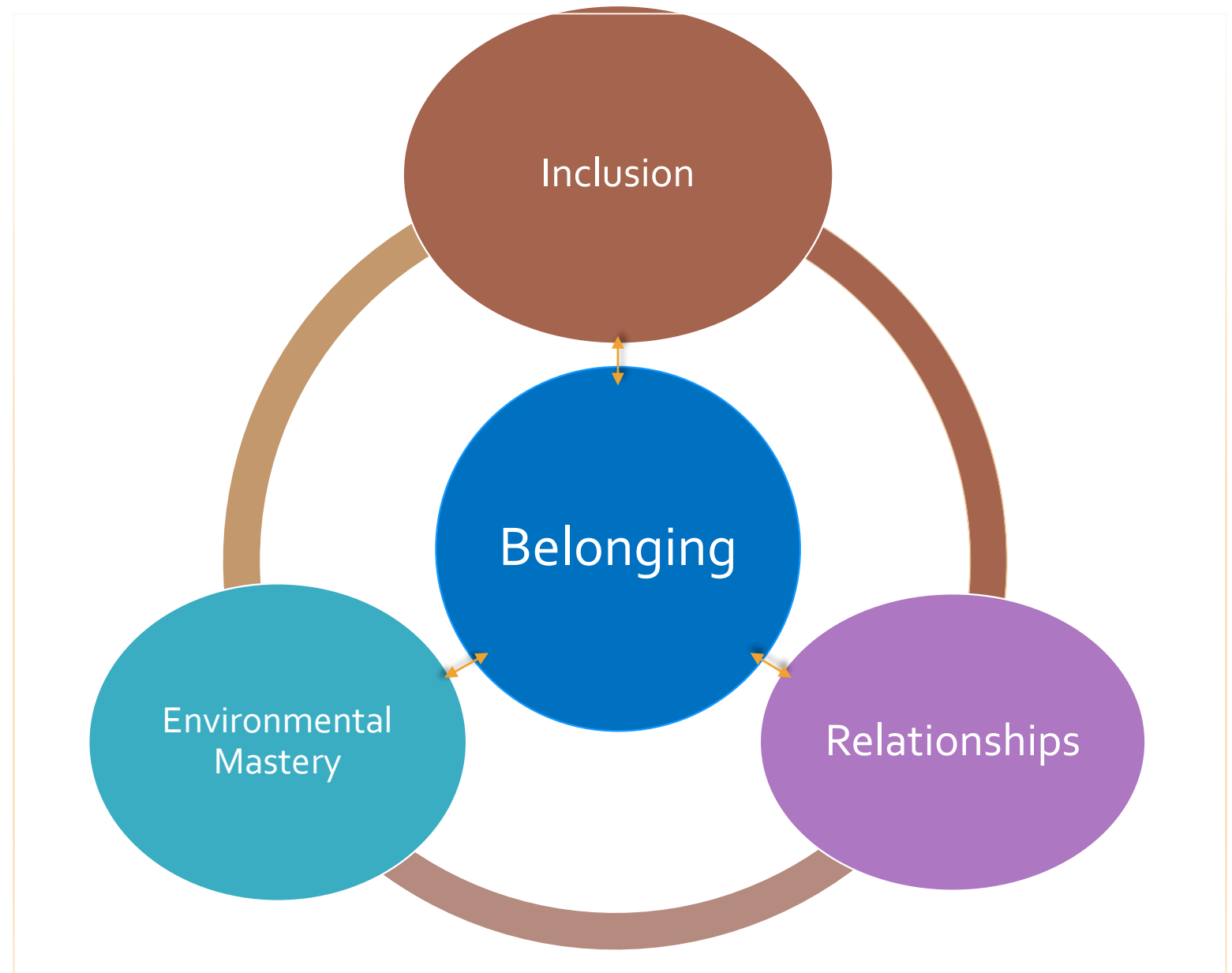
Children drawings



Environmental Mastery

- Parent: The camp made them feel that they have a status, that they are important, and their voices are heard. They left the camp with confidence.”
- Camper, girl, aged 11: The camp in general helped me to fit in and to feel like I am part of Montreal. I know more spaces now—I know how to go to many places more independently.
- Camper, boy, aged 13: I feel that I belong more to Montreal. I know more people and other cultures. I realized that some are very close to ours. We are now more stable. We know the camp and its people. We organise our time. I feel more stable in our life, and in the area... [The camp] helped me integrate more. I learned how to deal better with people around me. Also, my communication skills are improved, I communicate more, and in a nicer way with everybody compared to before the camp. For example, before I could say to someone “Come to play with us,” but now I will say, “Would you like to play with us?” It’s up to this person to say yes or to say no. This is one of the things that I noticed the camp changed in me.

Discussion





Implications

- Practice:
 - Provide training for counselors on trauma-informed care and the contexts of children coming from war zones
 - Support parent engagement by parent gatherings in order to share information about integrating into Montreal and provide space for them to share concerns and questions within a group setting
- Research:
 - Look at the long-term impacts of camp participation
 - Did camp participation facilitate involvement in other spheres of activity during the school year?

References

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