Migrant youth and wellbeing:
Assessing young people's participation in a community-based welcome program during the COVID-19 pandemic

Emilia Gonzalez, BSc and Mónica Ruiz-Casares, PhD

Background

Relocation and resettlement are often accompanied by physical, mental, and social challenges for **migrant youth**, which can be a risk factor to their wellbeing and development[1,2]. During the COVID-19 pandemic, young people have reported increased levels of psychosocial distress, anxiety, and social isolation[3].

Community-based welcome programs can benefit the resettlement and wellbeing of newcomer youth, also during the pandemic[5,6]. There is limited research on the mechanisms by which these programs work from the **perspective of youth**, and how those are affected by COVID-19.

Objective

Explore **migrant youth's experiences during COVID-19** as participants in Say Ça!, a community-based organization in Montreal that offers newcomer youth one-on-one tutoring & cultural activities.

Method

Six youth from Say Ça! participated in a **photo novella** project to reflect on their experiences in the online program during COVID-19 and how these contributed to their wellbeing. **Semi-structured online interviews** documented the meaning behind the journal entries and accompanying images.

Results

Opportunities

Newcomer youth described **memorable moments and opportunities** of participating in Say Ça! during COVID-19:

- **socialize** with other youth;
- **learn new languages** that facilitate their communication;
- explore **new activities**; and
- **self-empowerment.**

"In Say Ça!, I get my inspiration from the people around me. (...) I feel creative in Say Ça!, as if I were the doll and all the colours are the imagination. (...) And so in Say Ça!, I feel like colorful, I feel happy and that is why I put the colourful colours." (Dani)

"The first image shows like a barrier between English and French and I thought I could not integrate as easily since I didn't speak French but like Say Ça! helped me better my French so I can communicate with people more easily." (Camille)
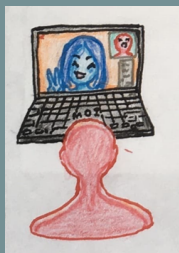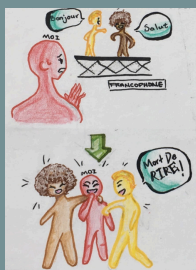
"The next [image] is like me and my tutor to show how I like the hospitality and how nice she is towards me. And the heart, the hands forming the heart shows how kind the teachers and the tutors are at Say Ça!." (Camille)

"When I am at Say Ça!, I feel very happy. The people there are very nice with us. I love also when we do activities in group that push people to be social." (Alex)

Challenges

Youth also described **challenges** to participating in the program:

- **Unstable internet** connection;
- Absence of a **space** in their house free from distractions;
- Difficulties **socializing** with other youth online; and
- **Balancing time** with school, extracurriculars and household tasks.

"I did not participate much at Say Ça! during the pandemic because I do not like online!! I would like it if we returned to Say Ça! and we won't stay online!" (Alex)

"[If] we go back to Say Ça to do lessons or to talk with other people, it is easy, you know? But now, with the COVID and everything, online, it's just like, when the class is over everyone closes the call and it's like there's nothing going on, and that's it." (Jules)

Youth Recommendations

The participants voiced **recommendations** for community-based programs to best respond to the needs of newcomer youth during COVID-19:

1. Services should **alternate online and in-person** sessions to facilitate youth interaction with peers;
2. Organizations should consider **delivering care packages** with materials to participate in activities from home;
3. Youth-to-youth programs **facilitate connection** between the program facilitators and users; and
4. **Age-appropriate activities and a personalized program** will best respond to the youth's specific needs.

Conclusions

- The study validated the need to collect **first-hand information about youth's experiences** in the context of physical distancing, considering **limitations** and **necessary adaptations** to conducting social science research in this context.
- Newcomer youth **recognize and appreciate** the opportunities that participating in Say Ça! offered them, despite the **challenges** of providing online services.
- Community-based initiatives should **reflect the needs of their service users** by delivering **personalized programs** that consider **youth-to-youth** support and **age- and language-appropriate activities**.

Works cited

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