

Jungle Tracks: Unleashing the power of stories to heal from refugee trauma

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Article

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Abstract

Children and young people from refugee backgrounds witness and experience multiple traumatic incidents in the context of their refugee journeys that often remain unspoken because of the inherent challenge to think and talk about these experiences. In addition, they encounter ongoing trials when transitioning to their new homes which place them at risk. *Jungle Tracks* was developed in 2002 to facilitate therapeutic engagement with refugee children and young people in schools, within a preventative framework. It is a collection of five short stories that have been composed to mirror multiple traumas and cumulative struggles including grief and loss, displacement, discrimination, disempowerment, difficulties with sleep and affect regulation. Whilst communicating in a non-threatening manner, the stories encourage the reader/listener to connect and make meaning of their traumas by identifying with the protagonists in the stories. *Jungle Tracks* not only bypasses initial resistance but also leverages the power of stories to instil hope and unleash innate healing forces. This paper aims to provide an overview of the *Jungle Tracks* programme and the results of an initial evaluation of the implementation of *Jungle Tracks*. This was initiated to provide direction for future research and development of the programme. It was concluded that when children and young people are given the opportunity to process and make meaning of their past traumatic experiences, it can assist them to heal and recover and also offer them the potential for post traumatic growth.

The role of stories

Since time immemorial, stories have been used to communicate and have had social significance in our daily lives. Stories have played an important role in our survival as a species as they have helped us make meaning of our lives, the environment we live in, and assisted in the transmission of indispensable skills and values across generations (Clandinin, 2006).

Many researchers believe that stories – fairy tales, folk tales and myths – emerged in response to the need to explain and make sense of the powerful phenomenon that were difficult to understand. They were developed as a means to help us manage and overcome fears linked to powerful or challenging forces (Codde, 2009). Ingrid Riedel, a fairy tale researcher who was a child during the Second World War, said that she managed to cope with her fear in the bomb shelters by reading fairy tales, especially the gruesome ones (Jacoby et al., 1992).

Stories and fairy tales have been shared with children and young people because of their potential to create unique opportunities to better understand and resolve the inner conflicts and dilemmas children and young people experience, in a manner they can cope with. Whilst offering knowledge of life that could be difficult to comprehend, they instil hope for a better future as they usually end positively. In addition to providing models for desirable behaviour and facilitating our understanding of complex issues, stories challenge our thoughts and beliefs in a non-threatening or safe way (Bettelheim, 2010).

Furthermore, stories have the potential to strengthen the relationship between the listener and the storyteller whilst empowering the listener to deal with the terrors and challenges in their lives. The storyteller's emotional responses, comments or reflections could guide the child or young person's reactions and increase their emotional literacy. This reinforces the relationship of trust and attachment with the storyteller (Frude & Killick, 2011) and paves the foundation of a successful relationship.

Refugee trauma experienced by children and adolescents

Children and adolescents from refugee backgrounds witness and experience multiple traumatic incidents in the context of their refugee journeys. Their refugee trauma experiences are likely to be further compounded by the stressors they encounter in transition, settlement and acculturation (Bronstein & Montgomery, 2011). Their experiences are challenging to think and talk

about and often remain unspoken (Gormez *et al.*, 2018). As a result, they often do not receive the interventions and treatment that are necessary to assist with their healing.

According to the UNHCR 2018 report, over 50% of the 70.8 million forcibly displaced people were children and young people below 18 years of age (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2019). This implies that over 35 million children and adolescent refugees are at risk of developing psychological disorders, mainly post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression and other anxiety-related difficulties (Hodes, 2000).

In addition, exposure to trauma, multiple losses, ongoing stressors and lack of supportive networks could influence the onset and course of symptoms related to depression and PTSD (Ehnholt & Yule, 2006). Refugee children and young people could also be at risk of developing neurophysiological disorders due to an exaggerated readiness for flight or fight, which are manifestations of survival strategies compounded by cultural influences in how symptom clusters are expressed (Hodes, 2000).

Therapeutic interventions

Despite the widespread use of the above 'labels' that recognise and reflect the complex mental health needs of refugee children and young people, relatively few therapeutic interventions have been specifically developed to address these needs. The National Child Traumatic Stress Network (NCTSN) has noted that addressing the multiple needs of this vulnerable population is challenging and compounded by this client population's reluctance to engage with, or seek assistance from mental health services (Ehnholt & Yule, 2006; Lustig *et al.*, 2004; Slone & Mann, 2016).

The NCTSN reports that evidence-based interventions for refugee children have yet to be identified (Birman *et al.*, 2005). Approaches that incorporate trauma-focussed cognitive behaviour therapy (TF-CBT) and eye movement desensitisation and reprocessing (EMDR) could be beneficial, but are yet to be systematically evaluated in refugee populations. The risks of negative reactions to therapeutic interventions as a result of interventions triggering traumatic memories and discontinuing treatment prematurely have also been noted in pilot studies (Pacione *et al.*, 2013).

Whilst there is a paucity of research related to preventative interventions that reduce the mental health risks of refugee children and adolescents (Fazel & Betancourt, 2018), limited research indicates that narrative approaches that include testimonial therapy, narrative exposure therapy (Ehnholt & Yule, 2006) and storytelling are useful approaches to address the needs of refugee children and young people (Lee *et al.*, 2018). Groupwork and school-based interventions that integrate symbolic use of objects, such as stories and the metaphors in them, art, relaxation and movement, have shown promising results (Fazel & Betancourt, 2018).

Aims of this paper

This paper will outline the therapeutic storytelling intervention, 'Jungle Tracks' that was developed specifically for refugee children and adolescents and trialled in schools across NSW. It presents an overview of the short stories in *Jungle Tracks* and outlines the themes that emerged from the initial evaluation of the implementation of the Jungle Tracks programme. In addition to providing preliminary data related to the effectiveness of the programme, this evaluation is expected to inform and provide direction to guide further development of the programme and an evaluation tool to measure its outcomes.

Background to Jungle tracks

Jungle Tracks was developed in 2002 in response to a surge of urgent requests for assistance received by the NSW Service for the Treatment And Rehabilitation of Torture and Trauma Survivors (STARTTS) from schools with recently enrolled refugee students from African communities. Children and young people were, however, not being referred to STARTTS for regular individual health assessments and interventions.

Primary and senior schools approached STARTTS, the specialised service for refugee trauma in NSW, for assistance to manage and address the needs of refugee students in crisis situations. The need to work together to overcome barriers regarding willingness to engage with a mental health service such as STARTTS was also identified. The schools also shared the challenges they had encountered in their attempts to support children and adolescents to engage with more contemporary therapeutic interventions that rely on life skills education, or directly thinking and discussing issues related to personal trauma and difficult past experiences.

Jungle Tracks was therefore developed as a pilot project to facilitate therapeutic engagement with refugee children and young people within a preventative framework because many refugee children and young people are at risk of developing mental health problems as a result of the interplay of refugee trauma experiences, challenges negotiating re-settlement environments and cultural differences.

The five illustrated short stories were written by the first author. The theme of the first story was influenced by the dominant reasons for referral which were behavioural and learning problems in school and adjusting to a new home in Australia. The other four stories were developed and written as the group progressed to address issues that were highlighted by participants during sessions. The stories mirror the traumas and challenges shared by participants and include grief and loss, discrimination, displacement, disempowerment, difficulties with sleep and affect regulation.

The short stories in *Jungle Tracks* attempted to capitalise on the power of stories to instil hope and unleash innate healing forces. It was expected that by identifying with the protagonists in the stories, the reader/listener would be encouraged to connect and make meaning of their trauma experiences. Leveraging the power of stories to communicate in a non-threatening manner, 'Jungle Tracks' also attempted to bypass initial resistance to therapy.

Following the introduction of Jungle Tracks in schools, positive feedback was consistently received from facilitators about the impact of the programme. However, facilitators found it a challenge to articulate with clarity the exact nature of these impacts. Whilst facilitators acknowledged that the programme was beneficial, they recognised that the psychological measures being used, which were primarily symptom focussed, could not accurately capture the changes they observed in participants. Hence, this exploratory qualitative study was undertaken to better understand the nature of the impact of the programme. Given that therapeutic storytelling was a novel concept in work with refugee children and young people, this was considered to be the first stage of an evaluation to give direction to further research and practice in this area and inform the development of an evaluation tool.

Ethical issues

Schools self-referred into the Jungle Tracks programme, and consent of both the parents and group participants was managed by each school. Parents were met with individually by school staff

Table 1. The stories in Jungle Tracks

Short story	Synopsis	Dominant theme
Sam and Sonia	Sam and Sonia are unaccompanied minors who arrive in Australia with an Aunt	Transitioning from a refugee camp, settling in school, the concept of counselling
Colours of the wind	Charlie, a young monkey is separated from his father when forced to flee his home along with his mum and sister. Charlie undertakes a treacherous journey across the ocean before he reaches a safe place. He then realises that his father is dead and will never return	Dealing with death of a parent, bereavement and loss. Introduces focus on breath, relaxation and finding inner peace
Deano learns to smile again	Deano, a young deer, loses his home which is destroyed in a fire. He is ridiculed as he looks different from the other deer in his new home	Dealing with discrimination and building self-esteem
Enter the lion	Sam's life is overtaken by a metaphorical lion, Luis. Sam learns how to control and 'tame' this beast and wave him goodbye	Managing flashbacks, intrusions and upset feelings
Chui and Teeter	Chui, the leopard, and Teeter, the turtle dove, are metaphorical images that appear in Sonia's dreams. Sonia learns how to manage her fear of Chui and cope with her frightening dreams	Addressing disturbed sleep and distressing dreams

along with an interpreter or teacher's aide and explained the programme based on an information sheet that had been provided to them by STARTTS. In one school, the parents were invited to a session where they were read one of the stories to give them an idea of what the group process would be like. In each session, and particularly at the start of the programme, all participants were informed of the voluntary nature of the programme and their ability to withdraw or leave the session if they wished. Confidentiality was explained and agreed to by all group participants and within each school.

To conduct the evaluation, the evaluation officer established telephone contact with schools that had been involved in the pilot stage of the programme. Facilitators from six of the seven schools who had been involved in the Jungle Tracks pilot were contacted by the evaluation officer and all facilitators from these schools provided informed consent to participate in the evaluation. (The facilitator who was only partially involved in the programme was not contacted).

An overview of the stories in Jungle Tracks

Jungle Tracks consists of five illustrated short stories which replicated common refugee trauma experiences and their sequelae.

Table 1 above represents the stories, a synopsis of each story and the dominant theme each story targets.

Sequence in which the stories are presented

With children aged between 6 and 16 years, the stories were presented as follows:

- 1 Sam and Sonia
- 2 Colours of the wind
- 3 Deano learns to smile again
- 4 Chui and Teeter
- 5 Enter the lion

With younger children (4–7 years) in kindergarten and early primary school, *Colours of the wind* was read first instead of Sam and Sonia, and the stories were presented in the following sequence:

- 1 Colours of the wind
- 2 Deano learns to smile again
- 3 Chui and Teeter

Group participants

The above short stories were read together in small groups of five to eight participants, in primary and secondary schools with children aged between 4 and 16 years. In primary schools, mixed gender groups were facilitated, and gender-specific groups were facilitated in senior schools to be culturally appropriate. This decision to segregate the genders was made after it was noted in some initial sessions that the girls appeared to be reticent.

Structure of the sessions

Facilitators were supported by interpreters or teacher aides who assisted with communication: translating and interpreting words and concepts in the stories as required. Each session commenced with a 'warm up' or 'icebreaker' activity, such as introductory games, or a breathing and relaxation exercise, or a music and dance sequence. Sessions ended with 'grounding' or 'down time' activities such as colouring in, acting out a favourite scene in the story, deciphering optical illusions, relaxation and breathing.

The central part of the group session was story reading and reflecting or discussing themes or issues that followed on from the stories. Participants and facilitators sat in a small circle and took turns in reading the story. In groups with younger children who had not as yet learned to read, facilitators 'picture read' the stories: a process through which the facilitator told the story from the pictures, summarising the text. Older children were encouraged to take part in reading the text.

When reading the stories, facilitators would often pause and invite participants to read, reflect or ask questions if they wished. All participants were nevertheless given the choice to stay silent and a flexible approach guided by the needs of participants was adopted. Thus, in some sessions, participants often discussed a memory or issue that scenes from the stories could have triggered and, as a result, read only a paragraph or two from the story. Participants were also offered individual sessions if they needed more time or space on their own.

The length of each session varied between 45 minutes and 1 hour, as it was dependent on school time tables. The 10 sessions programme was generally run over 10 weeks, the length of a normal school term.

Facilitators were recommended by school principals or head teachers and had themselves expressed an interest in the Jungle Tracks approach. They were from varied cultural backgrounds:

Table 2. An overview of the facilitators

Respondent number	School	Gender	Professional background	Age of participants
1	Primary School, Public	Female	School teacher	6–11 years
2	Primary School, Public	Female	School teacher	9–11 years
3	Primary School, Public	Male	School teacher	9–11 years
4	Primary School, Public	Female	School teacher	9–11years
5	Primary School, Catholic	Female	Pastoral Care Worker	4–7 years
6	Primary School, Catholic	Female	Pastoral Care Worker	4–7 years
7	Senior School, Catholic	Female	School Teacher	11–16 years
8	Senior School, Catholic	Female	Pastoral Care Worker	12–15 years
9	Senior School, Catholic	Male	Pastoral Care Worker	12–15 years
10	Senior School, Catholic	Female	School Counsellor	13–14 years

two facilitators were Middle Eastern, one was African and the rest were Anglo Australian. Their experience working in schools varied between 2 and 35 years. Three facilitators were semi-retired members of clergy with extensive experience as educators: teachers and school principals. Another facilitator was a school principal close to retirement. A majority of the facilitators had initially co-facilitated the programme with the first author. The others had attended a short training course specifically designed for Jungle Track facilitators at STARTTS. All facilitators had facilitated at least one series of Jungle Tracks groups prior to being interviewed.

Table 2 above provides an overview of the 10 facilitators who participated in this study.

Data collection and analysis

Semi-structured interviews were conducted by the STARTTS' evaluation officer with 10 Jungle Track facilitators from seven schools: four primary schools and three high schools. Four respondents were interviewed individually, six were interviewed in dyads. All respondents were asked what they found worked well or not in the groups, the outcomes achieved and significant highlights. Each interview lasted approximately an hour.

All interviews were audio recorded with permission from participants, following which they were transcribed verbatim. NVivo data analysis software was utilised to assist with coding the data from transcripts and identifying themes.

A second level analysis was then conducted independently by the first two authors, where themes were analysed and connections between emergent themes were organised into clusters which are presented below.

Emergent superordinate themes

Facilitators observed changes in two broad areas:

1. In the participants
2. In themselves.

Changes observed in participants

1. Improved interpersonal relationships:

Improved interpersonal relationships within the group: Facilitators noted that participants began to increasingly support each other

within the group as sessions progressed. Comments below reflect these observations.

The 3 boys bonded, whereas before their relationships were disjointed and they had problems between them. (R.10, 13–14years)

The kids were really supportive of each other . . . we found that a bit surprising really, because that was one of the things that, you know, if they could find a chink in the armour of each other, they would go for the jugular (laughs). But during this program they didn't, they were very supportive of each other. (R.1, 6–11 years)

Normally in the classroom they would be sort of a bit shy to talk or read . . . in Jungle Tracks they're sitting down and encouraging each other, and they're being positive, especially the males towards the females. (R.7, 11–16 years)

Improved interpersonal relationships with other peers:

They play in the playground a bit more, uhm, they're speaking more in class, the other kids are including them a lot more, talking to the new ones a lot more, there's been a really positive spin off. (R.4, 9–11 years)

Improved relationships with facilitators and other school staff:

Several facilitators reported that a significant outcome of the programme was the trust and close relationships that were established between participants, facilitators and other school staff.

[After Jungle Tracks] she didn't walk around putting her arm through a wall every time she walked past! (R.8, 12–15 years)

If a kid ran off out of the school and was upset, which they often did, I found that if I walked out, I had a better relationship and they would come back with me, it was like we knew each other, we were part of the same family. (R.1, 6–11 years)

You could tell by their smiles when you walked past them in the playground, you know, they'll come up and ask you how you are. So socially they gained confidence and that's a beautiful thing to see. (R.10, 13–14 years)

2. Behavioural changes

A general reduction in behaviour management issues in the classroom and playground

Facilitators noted a general sense of calm amongst students following the programme.

Some of them have really settled down in terms of their acting out behaviours.

(R.4, 9–11 years)

In one school, facilitators reported how participants in the programme were able to approach relevant staff to draw their attention to difficulties encountered in the playground. Earlier, this was not possible as these participants tended to display aggression which had resulted in physical skirmishes in the playground.

Improved academic performance

Facilitators noticed that participants were more settled in classrooms, less distracted and as a result had more energy to focus on academic tasks. One facilitator described the progress as, *'shifting into a different gear (after the program)'*. Another reported the following:

Our main aim was to make them feel comfortable in the classroom, so that they can do what is expected of them there, in terms of schoolwork. Because they needed to learn that there were a different set of social skills needed for that. And especially with the older boys that did happen. We didn't formally record anything, but some of the other teachers commented to me that they were settling down in their classes and then I told them that we were doing this program.

(R.10, 13–14 years)

Facilitators described a significant change in one participant who was considered to have an intellectual disability before participating in Jungle Tracks. However, the suspected cognitive impairment dissipated when she participated in the programme. This shift was described as follows:

Just her expression and insight, and she really encourages the rest of the group to think about things . . . she's not afraid to participate and contribute and to really uhm, get into the stories.

(R. 2, 9–11 years)

The co-facilitator noted:

The exact opposite was happening in the classroom (before Jungle Tracks), where she was actually referred to the learning support team as possibly having major intellectual disabilities, because she couldn't do anything, she couldn't make sense of anything, she was really slow . . . and now the teachers see her quite differently, she's coming out in the classroom and contributing things, and they're starting to see she's not as slow as they first thought.

(R.4, 9–11 years)

Other transformations

Facilitators mentioned similar transformations observed in other participants:

- One participant reported he could not read English and confided that he did not want to attend class because he found it *'too hard'*. However, towards the end of Jungle Tracks, he felt confident and requested to read the stories aloud, even when he was not expected to.
- Another participant displayed aggressive behaviours and was labelled the *'naughty one'* by his father, a respected community leader. His brother was known as the *'good boy'*. However, in Jungle Tracks the *'naughty one'* emerged as a leader. The facilitator reported that

He [the naughty one] had the opportunity in that group to be a leader, and he was the one who was the most supportive of the other kids, and he often led the way, like he'd look around, we could see him glancing at other kids,

and he'd almost say what they [other kids] wanted to say but couldn't say it [themselves].

(R.1, 6–11 years)

3. Self-disclosures

Many participants spontaneously shared details of their past experiences including confiding personal details that they had not spoken about or revealed to anyone previously.

(See section *Disclosing narratives of past for more details*)

Changes facilitators noticed in themselves

Even though there was no formal question in the semi-structured interview about the impact of the programme on the facilitators or shifts in their perceptions, facilitators spontaneously mentioned the impact facilitating Jungle Tracks had on them.

3.1 Initial scepticism about Jungle Tracks

Facilitators confided that initially they felt as if they were *'clutching at straws'* and believed the programme would *'not work'* because they felt that the children and young students would not engage in reading stories. All facilitators indicated that their decision to run Jungle Tracks was influenced by a desperate need to help students *'to settle'*. Referrals to the programme included students experiencing difficulties adjusting to the school environment, students who had been reported for school yard violence and behaviour management issues such as truancy, and these behaviours were impacting academic performance. This context was summarised as follows:

Oh, look, we were just desperate basically, because the boys in particular were incredibly violent with each other, the parents were at their wits end, not knowing what to do . . . We could see that there was just so much inside these little boys particularly, that they needed to get out.

(R.1, 6–11 years)

Despite these initial apprehensions upon completion of the programme, facilitators were unequivocal about the positive outcomes achieved as a result of the programme.

3.2 A better understanding of the participants and their experiences

All facilitators commented that their understanding of the background trauma experiences of participants was further enhanced and that they also felt connected to the participants. They linked this to disclosures that were spontaneously shared by participants. One facilitator reported the following:

Once they've actually gone into something and started talking about it, then they're more comfortable to talk. You know, they'll come and say, hey, you know the woman I'm here with that's not my mother, well I'm having problems with this or that or whatever, you know. So, they're confident to go into their family stuff after this [Jungle Tracks], and they feel like you've got more of an understanding of what they've been through.

(R.8, 12–15 years)

A similar sentiment was echoed by other facilitators who repeated what was said above:

They feel like you've got more of an understanding of what they've been through.

(R.1, 6–11 years)

Facilitators reported that narratives of resilience they witnessed resulted in them feeling connected to the children and young people. (Refer later section for examples of information disclosed)

Group process/stages

The changes outlined above could be linked to multiple factors that often come into play when attempts are made to better understand complex phenomenon such as the impact of refugee trauma on children and young people. A possible prelude to the above changes could be associated with gradual shifts in perceptions about the programme, the impact of storytelling and the holistic approach adopted by schools that are outlined below.

Engagement with storytelling: overcoming initial reticence

At the start of the programme, participants tended to be reticent and older participants would arrive late. However, as the programme progressed, there was a noticeable change; participants began to arrive on time and even remind each other about the group.

You could see it in their body language. At the beginning they turned up late, but after that they were helping to find each other on the basketball court and saying, "Hey, it's time now". They were keen. Also, for the first 3 sessions they were quiet and reserved, and they held back from the group, but after that they started coming close and helping each other with the reading. It was very interesting to watch their body language.

(R.10, 13–14 years)

With primary school aged groups, facilitators noted that at the beginning of the programme, young children would be excitable and edgy, but as sessions progressed, the children not only became more responsive but also appeared calm and more settled.

Increase participation in activities, building trust

As participants began to get involved with the stories, they began to participate in reading them aloud.

[At the beginning] you think oh well, our kids aren't into it, but now you start to see the changes, you see them become more comfortable and more vocal about various issues. Especially when it comes to reading, they want to read it.

(R.7, 11–16-years)

As participants began to share their thoughts and feelings, they began to get involved in making decisions about activities at the beginning and end of group sessions. This coincided with a strengthening of the relationship of trust between participants and facilitators.

Connecting with story lines and characters in the stories

Facilitators agreed that reading and reflecting on the story lines that were similar to their own experiences facilitated sharing of past experiences and ongoing challenges. This is evident in the comments such as those mentioned below.

Well I think the books are great because whatever issue arises, we've had an incident in the playground or some event in their lives that's taken place, we always stop and we focus on that issue. There are so many themes and there are so many events we can talk about through reading it. Whenever that arises, we're onto it, so when an incident happens, we go back to one of our characters. We definitely wouldn't be able to do it without them.

(R.7, 11–16 years)

Some of them they just took it as a story and talked about it in terms of what happened to the characters, but others would relate it to themselves and say, well, that was like when kids used to tease me and pick on me, and were able to make that sort of connection.

(R.2, 9–11 years)

I think the children very much relate to the animals, to that whole idea, but it did provide a stepping stone to broach topics like being a refugee, and war. Now I think these little children, some of them might have experienced some pretty horrible things. I know some of our older kids have. It opens up the possibility for them to talk about you know, the people in their families that have died, fighting and some of the other themes that are in the books.

(R.6, 4–7 years)

Sharing in the group reflected that participants were able to relate to the characters and their experiences without feeling threatened in the groups and this was transferred to behaviours outside the group setting as well.

Significant turning points

Disclosing narratives of past

Facilitators mentioned significant moments in the programme when participants who were very quiet, withdrawn or aggressive opened up and disclosed personal experiences. As an example, after reading *Colours of the wind*, where Charlie's dad dies, one 4-year-old boy spoke of how his father had been killed soon after their arrival in Australia.

And when we got to the part where the father dies in the story, you know, I think we were all conscious of him, looking at him out of the corner of our eye. He went quiet and sat still, which is most unusual (laughs), very still, and after a while he said "my dad died". And that was the first time in all those months that he said anything. And it seemed to free him up to talk to his teacher about his dad.

(R 5, 4–7 years)

Processing and meaning making occurring without verbalising

Facilitators observed that processing occurred even when participants stayed silent. Even though sharing was encouraged, participants were offered the choice to remain silent if they were not prepared to share. The following anecdote illustrates this:

[When asked] Do you remember a time when you had difficulty getting food or water? And one of the boys said yes, but didn't want to talk about it, he was a big boy, really big Year 6 boy, and he just sat and cried.

(R.1, 6–11 years)

The facilitators reported that this was like a catharsis for the boy as following this incident he participated more in subsequent groups and in the classroom.

In another group, a boy who had not spoken at all during seven sessions of the programme suddenly started talking when the group was discussing who believed in them after reading *Deano learns to smile*. He said, 'Mother, Father, and Brother'.

And he actually smiled after it, he had a smile on his face, and the other kids said "He talked! He talked!" And then they all gave him a clap, so that was nice.

(R.2, 9–11 years)

Disclosures and sharing during "down time" activities were also mentioned. One facilitator noted how a participant drew a picture of his family and shared problems experienced by his family. Another invented her own language and wrote pages capturing her feelings and thoughts.

Reactions to stories

Colours of the wind was reported to be the most powerful book across all groups.

[In Colours of the wind] Charlie went through that whole range of emotions, you know, he didn't want to believe, and then he was angry, and then he came to accept it, and they really understood that, and we were able to talk to them about different feelings that they could identify, so I think having the characters allowed a little bit of de-personalisation but also still allowed them to – like they could look at it as Charlie but they could also relate it to themselves.

(R.2, 9–11 years)

All stories assisted participants connect to their past experiences in meaningful non-threatening ways. *Sam and Sonia* assisted older age groups because the human characters reflect on challenges experienced in the school setting, and the story *Deano learns to smile* was helpful specifically to talk about issues of self-esteem and loneliness.

The “whole school” approach

Facilitators also noted that Jungle Tracks was introduced in conjunction with a whole schools' approach, which cannot be discounted in the overall success of the programme.

I think the kids were more relaxed with other kids in the school. There definitely was a change, we could see there was a change, I don't know, they had been acknowledged in the school. I don't know what their feeling was, but it was almost as though they had got a bit of ownership of the place because something had been organised for them.

(R.1, 6–11 years)

Limitations

Some facilitators noted that participants at times experienced difficulties understanding a few words in the texts in the short stories. However, other facilitators reported that they used this as a means to stimulate discussion:

They were stumbling over some of the words, but that actually opened up the sessions for us, because whenever they got stuck with a word then we would stop and focus on that part of the story, and that would start a discussion. If it had been too easy, we would have gone through it too fast, but this way we had to stop and look closely at what was going on in the story.

(R.10, 13–14 years)

Even though lack of comprehension of a few words could be problematic, the general feeling among facilitators was that it was a good way to challenge participants and expand their English skills:

Today, one of the words that came up was 'ecstatic', and you know, the kids are not really going to understand that. But it's an opportunity to talk about it and say, 'What does that mean? Imagine what he was feeling'. So, it's not that it's inappropriate because it's actually broadening their language skills anyway.

(R.8, 12–15 years)

Facilitators reported that it was not always possible to read all 5 stories in 10 weeks. Hence, the groups varied in the number of stories that they read. However, in a few schools, it was possible to extend the programme by a few weeks to complete reading all short stories. This variation creates a limitation on the evaluation of this programme to produce generalisable results and cannot contribute data towards a manualised or standardised way in which the programme is delivered. Another limitation of this evaluation is that formal feedback from participants was not obtained. However, most participants reported to the facilitators that they would like to continue reading the stories and also made requests for additional stories to be made available to them as they were beginning to enjoy the group and the activities.

Discussion

Participants' enthusiasm regarding the project together with the personal nature of the narratives shared by children and young people indicate that the programme could be an authentic intervention to assist children and young people access thoughts and feelings linked to difficult past experiences. This is supportive of previous research indicating that storytelling is a useful approach to address the needs of refugee children and young people (Lee et al., 2018). In addition, the evaluation suggested that this type of intervention is possibly an avenue to overcome the reported reluctance of this client population to engage or seek assistance from mental health services (Ehnholt & Yule, 2006; Lustig et al., 2004; Slone & Mann, 2016).

In addition to being able to remember and share their past experiences without being overwhelmed by them, participants in Jungle Tracks were reported to be more settled, confident and calm with an accompanied decrease in aggressive or behavioural management issues in the classroom and playground. They displayed improved social and interpersonal skills which extended beyond the group to peers and staff in the schools. This also resulted in an increased ability to focus on academic tasks and participation in the classroom-based tasks.

Furthermore, facilitators reported that as a result of the programme, they achieved a better insight into the experiences of the participants and the challenges they had endured. This, in turn, fostered an association of respect and trust being established between the participants and facilitators. As a consequence, some facilitators advocated for the involvement of class teachers to broaden their understanding of refugee children's experiences and needs.

Whilst facilitators reported that the stories were an important conduit that expedited these changes, these benefits would not have accrued if Jungle Tracks was not integrated into a 'whole school' approach to assist refugee students that included establishing communication with parents, employing teacher aides, pastoral care workers and rescheduling/restructuring classes and timetables to fit the programme. This is consistent with research that suggests that clinical group-based interventions in schools that integrate symbolic use of objects are effective (Fazel & Betancourt, 2018).

Furthermore, the shared knowledge, wisdom and compassion of the facilitators need to be factored into the outcomes achieved by the programme. As mentioned earlier, the facilitators were a committed group whose presence made a significant contribution to Jungle Tracks. In acknowledging the impact the programme had on them, they have also highlighted the importance of self-care when working with this vulnerable client population.

Whilst the groups functioned as safe, holding environments for emotions that may have been triggered when stories were read, the stories themselves instilled hope for a better future because of their positive ending. In addition, they could have assisted the listener to remember, better understand and process difficult experiences in a non-threatening way (Bettelheim, 2010). Research has demonstrated that when trauma survivors process, and are able to make meaning of, their traumatic or challenging experiences, positive behavioural and emotional changes occur (such as increased self-awareness, improved relationships) that reflect post traumatic growth (Tedeschi et al., 1998).

The positive impacts observed by facilitators suggest that assisting children and young people access and explore their past traumatic experiences, combined with assistance to help them negotiate the challenges of re-settlement, could be important in

fostering belonging, building support networks and hence in mitigating mental health risks. As access to refugee children and young people is more feasible in school settings, school-based interventions are desirable.

The evaluation of this programme was designed and conducted after the completion of the Jungle Tracks groups, meaning it was limited in the scope of information that could be collected. As mentioned above, data were not collected from the child participants of the programme and future research which incorporates both pre and post data collection methodologies from both the child participants as well as perhaps parents or teachers could help strengthen the research findings and the conclusions that could be drawn from such data.

Conclusion

Further research with both participants and facilitators is needed to ascertain if changes in relationships increase self-understanding and greater appreciation of life, which reflects post traumatic growth, occurs in participants of Jungle Track programmes. It would also be interesting to explore if facilitators also experience vicarious post traumatic growth as a consequence of being exposed to trauma narratives.

Jungle Tracks has multiple benefits and additional research is needed to enhance its effectiveness in group settings and also extend the approach to individual work with the potential to be beneficial to clients across the lifespan.

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