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Building Community through Athletic Activities

by

Alyssa D. Taylor

**Capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for graduation with**

University Honors

with a major in
Music Therapy

in the Department of Music

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Abstract

Utah has a significant population of immigrants and refugees, which is constantly increasing. With the Cache Refugee and Immigrant Center recently recognized as an official resettlement agency, the refugee and immigrant populations are projected to grow, especially from Somalia and Syria. These families have a variety of physical, mental, emotional, and social needs. Literature confirms that community integration can greatly help in fulfilling all these need areas. In Europe, formal athletic groups help migrant background families integrate into their communities through sport. Although research has been completed in the United States on informal soccer pickup games, no research has been done on formal groups and their ability to build community in the U.S. like in Europe. This study seeks to fill this gap by investigating the impact of an organization in Northern Utah dedicated to using “sport to provide a supportive environment for new American families to integrate with local communities for personal, physical and social growth.” To protect the confidentiality and privacy of the study participants, the organization name has been omitted and will be referred to as simply “the organization.” To this point, the organization lacks meaningful research to measure its progress in meeting its mission statement. In order to qualify and quantify the organization’s impact, this project investigates the question: “Does the organization help families integrate into local communities and how?” During the summer and fall of 2023, I interviewed ten families participating in the organization. I recruited a mix of American and new American families using recommendations and information from the organization’s head coaches to contact them. Five interviewees required an interpreter. Interviews were qualitatively analyzed using NVivo. The interview data suggests that The Organization integrates families into the community by providing a space to build friendships, expand one’s worldview, and access community resources. The friendships have proven to be both homogenous and diverse, helping families build community with those of both similar and different cultural backgrounds to themselves. Parents deeply valued the opportunity their children had to expand their worldview by meeting and associating with individuals of different cultures, thus socializing them to unique ideas. Many resettled families lack the time, funds, and knowledge of activities to take advantage of resources offered for their children. The organization helps families overcome those barriers. The experiences of participants in this organization reflect those in similar organizations in Europe. The themes found suggest that while athletic activities have substantial benefits for health and community, they are not the only way to build community for those of migrant backgrounds. Similar organizations with a focus on different meaningful activities may have potential to build community for immigrant and refugee families as well. Future research on U.S. athletic organizations and other groups is needed.

For my new friends.

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Definitions

- Immigrant: a person who has come voluntarily to settle permanently in a country other than where they were born
- Refugee: a person forced to leave their home or country to escape war, persecution, natural disasters, or other harmful events
- Migrant Background: used to describe a person or group of persons that came to a new country as either refugees or immigrants
- New American: the term used by The Organization (the subject of study for this paper) to refer to those with a migrant background

Introduction

It is estimated that about 60,000 refugees reside in Utah (Gardner, 2017). About 27% of those refugees arriving to the state had symptoms of a mental illness or have experienced intense war and violence leading to internalized trauma (Bettmann et al., 2016; Chang, 2015). These individuals and families experience other needs that limit their ability to fully integrate into the community and live healthy lives. These include trouble locating resources, lack of education about healthcare, and limited English and translation services among many others (Hoggard, 2016).

Refugees make up only a portion of the immigrant population in Utah. In 2021, Utah reported almost 300,000 foreign born individuals residing in the state, a 75.4% increase from the year 2000 (*State Demographics Data - UT*, n.d.). And the numbers are expected to continue to rise. The 2021 census further reported that 41.5% of foreign-born individuals in Utah had limited English proficiency. On various levels, immigrants in the United States face mental health challenges, discrimination on a personal and political front, as well as limited access to interpretation and medical services (Adler Zwahlen et al., 2018; Monson, 2020; Trouille, 2021).

Integrating both refugee and immigrant families into their new communities can have a significant impact for good on their physical, mental, emotional, and social needs (Adler Zwahlen et al., 2018, 2018; Strang & Quinn, 2021). Integration is an intergenerational process where people from a migration background adapt increasingly to the majority-population from generation to generation over time (Adler Zwahlen et al., 2018). On the other hand, there is no consensus on the word community. In his book “The Sociology of Community Connections,” John G. Bruhn (2011) explains that it often implies relationships that go beyond casual acquaintance (p. 12). Scott Peck (1987) further argued that these community relationships represent a “commitment to rejoice together, mourn together, and to delight in each other, make others’ conditions our own” (p. 59). Integrating into community requires both the creation of meaningful relationships as well as the ability to access community resources (Bruhn, 2011).

Bruhn argued that increased social support leads to an increased ability to recover from illness as well as balance the demands of caregiving (Bruhn, 2011). Social connections also lead to increased personal physical and mental health (Rapp *et al.*, 2018). This includes improved ability to perform well in school (Frost et al., 2019). Social integration can take two forms: diverse networks that provide mutual support and trust or homogenous networks that only provide bonding connections. Rapp *et al.* explained that immigrants are more likely to make the latter, connecting primarily with those of similar backgrounds and ethnicity to themselves (2018). Homogenous bonding connections are often closed and do not provide the support and information needed to promote individual health. If cultural differences are wide, diverse networking becomes ever more difficult and racism and discrimination become ever more prevalent (Frost et al., 2019). Frost et al. (2019) add that religious differences further increase the chance of immigrants experiencing culture shock and diminished desire for diverse connections. Diverse connections create spaces for migrant background individuals to build trusting relationships with those different from themselves and thereby exchange community resources (Strang & Quinn, 2021).

Recent studies examined European voluntary sports clubs which invite foreign born individuals that have come as both immigrants and refugees to participate. The physical activity promoted in these organizations improves cognitive, social, emotional, and physical wellbeing (Bidzan-Bluma & Lipowska, 2018; Eime *et al.*, 2013). Studies have further shown that the benefits of such programs go “beyond sport” and allow refugees to make meaningful connections in the community (Stura, 2019). These clubs help to foster friendships, identification, and acceptance (Nagel *et al.*, 2020).

In the United States, one study investigated the importance of pick-up soccer games for Mexican immigrants creating strong social connections, but up to this point, no studies have examined formal athletic groups in the U.S. like those in Europe (Trouille, 2021).

To fill this gap, this study examines a non-profit organization in Northern Utah dedicated to using “sport to provide a supportive environment for new American families to integrate with local communities for personal, physical and social growth.” New American families are those with migrant backgrounds as either immigrants or refugees. Since 2018, a group of families from many countries gathers every week to participate in a variety of sports including running, biking, basketball, climbing, and soccer as led by volunteer coaches. About 30-45 individuals, mostly youth and children, participate every week along with volunteer coaches and caregivers. Currently, the demographic of youth athletes is roughly 46.1% from the United States, 36% from Eritrea/Ethiopia, 12% from Somalia, and smaller groups from Sudan, Mexico, Sierra Leon, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Because of the group’s small nature, study participants’ stories could potentially be recognized by their association with the group. To maintain confidentiality and privacy, the group name will be omitted and will simply be referred to as “The Organization.”

The Organization recently worked with a dietitian to understand the greatest needs of the immigrant and refugee population in the local area. In her focus groups and interviews, she discovered a great lack of education about healthcare resources as well as limited access to transportation, childcare, and cultural foods. In an effort to meet these challenges, The Organization offers more than athletics. They coordinate local families to volunteer time as tutors for both schoolwork and English learning for new American families. Behind the scenes, the head coaches generously offer hours to help these new American families locate resources for schooling, healthcare, and recreation which still feel very foreign and out of reach.

The Organization’s board of directors recently defined their values: “We take care of ourselves. We take care of each other. We try our best. This is a safe place.” These values reflect Scott Peck’s description of community: “commitment to rejoice together, mourn together, and to delight in each other, make others’ conditions our own” (Bruhn, 2011).

The Organization’s hope is to help immigrant and refugee populations in Cache Valley make those diverse connections that will provide the information and resources they need to live healthy lives. These connections enable refugees to overcome challenges and establish a new home. To this point, The Organization lacks meaningful research to measure its progress in meeting its mission statement. In order to assess the organization’s impact, we aim to explore the

following research question: “Does The Organization help families integrate into local communities and how?”

This project has two main objectives. First, we assess systematically the organization’s impact which will allow us to make recommendations to improve the participants’ experience. The Organization hopes the analysis provides evidence on their impact and strengthens their position to apply for funding to support more families. Although the results cannot be generalized globally, the project will also inform continued work with immigrants and refugees throughout Utah as they create community connections and a new home. From a scientific standpoint, this project will make a significant contribution to the literature on the role of sports on immigrant incorporation in the U.S.

Methods

The Utah State University Institutional Review Board approved the study procedures in May 2023 as IRB protocol #13004. Research funding from the Utah State University College of Humanities and Social Sciences Faculty-Student Summer Mentorship Grant and the Peak Summer Research Fellowship by Drs. David and Terry Peak made this study possible. It covered transcription fees, translation costs, and participant compensation.

Participants

The Organization provided information about program participants. Minors were excluded from interviews and instead recruited their parents or guardians. We invited 14 families, and we were able to interview nine families of heterogenous background. The interviewer made an attempt to contact all families at least twice usually beginning with a text or call followed by a home visit. (See Appendix I for scripts and Appendix II for flier). One additional family was recruited by the interviewer at an event hosted by the organization. The final sample was ten families.

Interpretation was largely unavailable during the recruitment process beyond Google Translate. The potential participants that did not speak English often asked other members of the household to help interpret the recruitment conversation.

To qualify for the interview, study participants had to 1) be 18+ years-old, 2) have participated in or have their children participate in least two The Organization activities (including, but not limited to, sports practices, group meets, music lessons, and tutoring), 3) be participating currently, and 4) not be a U.S. born volunteer coach without participating children.

The final sample was ten parents of The Organization’s primary participants (all minors). The country of origin of study participants is presented in Table 1.

Eritrea and Ethiopia are two distinct countries but are listed as one for this study because most of the interviewees born in Eritrea claimed country of origin dualism. They spent years living in Ethiopian refugee camps, at times more than the years spent in their place of birth. They had children and built a life there before moving to the United States.

Table I: Study Participant Demographics

Country of Origin	Percent of Interviewees
Eritrea/Ethiopia	50%
USA	20%
Somalia	20%
Ethiopia	10%
Rep. of the Congo	10%
Total	100%

Data Collection

Interviews were conducted with participants individually lasting about 20-30 minutes each. The interviews were performed in the place and language of the participant's choice. One participant asked to be interviewed over Zoom, one participant was interviewed at a local library, and the rest chose to be interviewed at their homes.

Interpretation was provided as necessary. Interpreters were volunteers from the community recommended by a member of The Organization's board of directors. One interprets between Somali and English professionally having been raised in Somalia herself and later coming to Utah for higher education. The other interpreter learned Tigrinya (the language of Eritrean interviewees) only within the last year. He grew up in Ethiopia and observed Eritrean culture and languages second hand as Eritrean refugees made encampments in Ethiopia. Both interpreters are deeply involved with the cultural groups they helped to translate for. Each already knew and was friends with the interviewees they helped to interpret for. Both also offered to interpret for free when they agreed to the project although were compensated later for their time.

The interpreters mediated the interviews both linguistically and culturally. Beyond interpreting the conversation and translating and explaining informed consent documents, the interpreters would explain complicated concepts (i.e. "community connections" or "impact") to the interviewees and cultural background (i.e. the religious views or wars in Eritrea) to the interviewer.

Before beginning the interview, the interviewer confirmed that the informed consent (see Appendix III) was understood and signed. The interpreters sight translated and explained the informed consent for non-English speakers. Interviewees were invited to ask any questions before signing the document.

The interviews had a semi-structured format which entailed following set schedule (see Appendix IV) and adding or changing questions according to the needs of or information shared by the interviewee. Upon completion of the interview, each interviewee received a \$20 Walmart gift card as compensation for their time.

Each interview was recorded using the interviewer's smartphone on a digital application or on Zoom then transferred to an encrypted cloud storage and deleted off personal devices. The recordings were transcribed by a company specialized in these services. Once interviews were transcribed, the interviews were deidentified. Pseudonyms were given based on common names from each interviewee's country of origin as found on a Bing search.

Data Analysis

All transcriptions were analyzed using the computer software NVivo. Key findings and patterns were coded by highlighting and linking quotes related to the research question. Quotes and annotations were coded into folders representing those patterns. Folders were created based on the interview questions, common interview topics, and key findings. Folders included "Community Connection," "Athleticism," "Overcoming Barriers," etc.

Results

All interviewees commented that The Organization is helping their families integrate into the local community. Several quotes illustrate this finding (all names are pseudonyms):

"I thank God, because all my connection is coming from [The Organization] where my child is to go to run, to play." -Joseph

"I found a community there." -Abrihet

"We're building community, not athletes." -John

New American families are not the only ones finding community through The Organization, local families are too. Building community took different forms for the various interviewees although three themes were prevalent: building and maintaining friendships, expanding worldview, and overcoming barriers to access community resources.

Friendships

"I was able to make friends...I feel like we have something that we share. We go out to just do stuff, whether it's practice or just hanging out. For me, the big impact is not just being active and running it's more like the engagement, the talking, the being there, seeing people, and just hanging out. That opportunity I never got that in my neighborhood or even in my workplace." -Abrihet

Community as friendships was a prevalent theme in 100% of the interviews. Making friends was not most families' initial motivation for joining. In fact, most interviewees began coming to The Organization practices because a friend already attending activities had invited them. However, upon joining, all interviewees determined that they or their children were able to maintain those friendships or make additional friends through The Organization. Several parents said they valued that their child spend more time moving with friends than on the TV or other

screens and that The Organization made this possible. Many of the interviewees and their children see these friends outside of The Organization practices:

Interviewer: Do you feel like The Organization has helped you make friends?

Amira: Yes... We have a lot of people that we connect [with]. When we...see each other, everywhere, we greet, we talk. There is a lot of people that we are connected [with] also because of that.

These relationships are building meaningful bonds that influence participants' lives positively. When one family considered an expensive move to be closer to family, they chose to stay in the area because of the friendships they had built through The Organization allowing them to live at a lower cost.

Some interviewees described the friendships as homogenous or among those of a similar culture as themselves. Fatimah admitted that most of her and her daughter's friends were "mostly Ethiopian/Eritrean" like themselves and that they would have known them without The Organization. On the other hand, Aaron, also from Eritrea/Ethiopia, said that he valued the opportunity The Organization offered to speak the same language as other participants and that it helped him build a "family."

Most interviewees described diverse friendships made with coaches and families of backgrounds different than their own. Helen said that before participating in The Organization, she only took her kids to visit their cousins. But since attending The Organization's practices, they have "become more familiar with different kinds of kids." When I asked Amira about her connections, she said most were not Somali like herself despite her limited English skills.

These diverse friendships are enabling connections outside The Organization as well. John's son met a boy from Eritrea at a running camp out of the state and was able to connect with him because of his experiences with The Organization:

"[The boy] had come from a refugee camp. He'd seen things that nobody should ever see, and [my son] could relate. He's like, 'Hey, I have friends that have had that,' and the guy was like, 'You know people like me?' He's like, 'Yes, I've met people like you.' They were able to have a conversation and build a relationship."

Although many of the interviewees send children to regular practices, most are unable to attend themselves on a regular basis. However, these parents still made connections through The Organization and most often because of the efforts of the head coaches and other volunteers. Helen talked about how nervous she was when one head coach took her kids to practice until he demonstrated consistency and earned her trust: "[at first I was] scared and I kept keep calling... Now I am so happy, he is like [a] second dad for the kids." Others spoke very highly of the head coaches and asked me how they were doing. They told me stories of how they helped their families and expressed deep interest in their families' welfare. Another interviewee named Joseph expressed particular gratitude for other volunteer coaches that had befriended him and helped get him get his Utah driver's license. Overall, data from the interviews suggest families engaged in The Organization are building community and finding friendship.

Expanding Worldview

“It’s really easy to get into a bubble of groupthink and like-mindedness and that’s not something I want for my children. I think it’s really one of the few places in [the area] where you can go, and you are exposed to a variety of cultures and people.” -Samantha

Half of the respondents, including native and foreign-born individuals, discussed the notion that in order to build community in a globalized world, one must come to know people, ideas, and cultures different from your own. Several parents referred to this idea as socialization:

“I want them to be socialized. I want them to be open-minded about other people. People who might look like them, or people who might not practice the same religion, or even cultural practices.” -Abrihet

John expressed his interest in the opportunity The Organization gave his kids to see different family dynamics.

Many talked about the importance of meeting new people:

“We get to meet with new people. It’s like, it become a platform. When someone is new there, they say, tell them, and they come and we see new people showing up there.” -Abel

“I meet new people that I would never meet anywhere else.”-John

When asked about the impact this expanded worldview has had on her kids Samantha said, “I don’t know if they’re thinking as deeply about that, but I do see the way that they relate to people. I think they’re a little more open to other ideas and to other people, to differences and that’s something that I want for them.” This openness to ideas, people, and differences opens doors to diverse friendships.

Overcoming Barriers to Access Community Resources

The Organization integrates families into the community not only by making a space to meet people, but also by making community activities and resources more readily available. A total of 60% of interviewees spoke of The Organization’s impact in making these resources accessible. Most new American parents interviewed work long hours of heavy labor and have little time, money, or energy to invest in their children’s schooling and extracurricular activities. The organization helps families overcome financial barriers by offering free activities and scholarships to other community programs such as piano lessons, summer camps, and competitive sports clubs. Abrihet illustrated this when she said the following:

“Before we joined The Organization, I was doing full-time school and I was working at a production line. I didn’t have any time to take my kids to any sport activity or any extracurricular activity this was, for me, a big opportunity. I don’t even have to worry about to pay for those, to sign them up for whatever...[For] the other families who are in

the same position I was in, I think they are getting that opportunity for their kids to do outdoor activities that the families won't be able to do because of [their] poor situation.”

Transportation is another barrier for new American families. Few have drivers' licenses or cars when they first resettle. Samantha observed:

“I have never met a [resettled] family that's in the middle of the adjustment phase that isn't irritated with how long it takes for them to get their license or a car because it is such a barrier having to rely on public transportation or other people...even if there's a free education program, you can't necessarily take advantage of it if you're waiting for the bus all the time to get to your work or doing things you need to do.”

The Organization helps new American families overcome this barrier by providing transportation to activities and events that would otherwise be out of reach.

Fatimah commented on yet another challenge: lack of knowledge about the resources available. For her and others, The Organization is the only athletics organization they know of for their kids because it was presented to them on their door step. Because The Organization seeks to diversify their activities and connect with other community programs, they offer community resources to families that would otherwise pass unbeknownst to them.

The Organization also helps with educational and language barriers by providing homework and English tutoring. Aamiina expressed gratitude for the tutors who are “helping [her] kids [with] their homework, whenever they need something.” This gives participants the skills they need to successfully navigate their new home. John talked about his amazement watching a young boy learn English who had recently moved from Ethiopia:

“We've been here so long [that little boy participant] over there...he didn't even speak English. He had just come...[a volunteer tutor] would do flashcards with him and it was the coolest thing. He's learning English. He'd be like, “Alligator.” [laughs]

Today, that boy speaks clear English and often translates for his parents who are still learning. Tutoring also provides a space for diverse friendships to form. John commented that his son is still really close with an Ethiopian participant of his same age because they worked on homework together in the buddy tutoring program.

Personal Experience

A surprising yet strong evidence for The Organization's ability to integrate families into the community was the interviewer's personal experience during the interviews. Several new American families were best contacted by a home visit. When the interviewer arrived at their doors the first time, children would recognize her from practices and the parents would ask if the head coaches had sent her. When the interviewer said yes, they welcomed her quickly into their homes, many offering food and drinks. Because the parents had a trusting relationship with the head coaches of The Organization, they were willing to open their doors to the interviewer and invest in a new connection.

Not only did their reaction represent a strong relationship with The Organization's head coaches, but it also demonstrated a desire and willingness to expand their community and include the interviewer in it. The interviewer felt supported and cared for as interviewees greeted her with hugs and generously gave her small gifts from their home countries.

The interviewer built friendships with participants and other volunteer coaches. Her worldview was expanded as she met families from around the globe. Her resources were amplified as she received support and mentorship from The Organization's head coaches. She found community there.

Other Findings

Community connection was the focus of the interviews and of the research project. However, the interviewees spoke of many other ways that The Organization positively impacted them and their families. Two major themes resounded: increased health and athleticism and increased discipline.

The Organization's positive impact on families' health and athleticism was a theme present in 80% of the interviews. Helen said that because of The Organization, her kids are "happy and healthy." Joseph explained, "Before, my son, he can't run from here to there, but now he can tell you, "Papa--" He can tell "Today I [ran] around for 5 times, 10 times." That is good, now, he knows how to play more." Samantha even spoke of The Organization's practices helping her son get the dopamine he needs to positively cope with ADHD. Fatimah added, "Number one [impact], just for the kids: just movement, just mentality, emotionally, just socializing with the kids participating instead of coming and watching TV." Abel explained that the head coaches took time to individually train his daughter and said that The Organization is "It's also a platform for kids if they want to be an athlete." Helen commented similarly: "Next step, we don't know if they want [to become] runners, the soccer players we'll see. Right now, they have just the activities, they're healthy."

Parents discussed their children's increased discipline because of The Organization in 40% of the interviews. Amira and Helen said the practices help their kids burn energy and be more obedient and less rambunctious at home:

"They learn discipline the first thing. They organize themselves. When she said organize, they can put your clothes, your shoes, whatever the right place. They can come in just throw away. [Before The Organization], they just spend many times on the phone, so when she calls them, even they didn't listen sometimes. That one is change, that's help; when she calls them, they're coming." – Helen

Joseph said that because of The Organization, "[my son] knows to respect another child when they're playing." Abel emphasized the discipline learned through goalsetting. The Organization keeps track of each participant's mileage over time. After running 40 miles total, the child earns a new pair of shoes. Speaking of this program Abel said:

“People look at [The Organization] like it’s just athletics, you just go run and stuff. As I said, the business part, you go there, there is like if you run 40 miles, you get shoes. That will train your mind to have a goal to help you. It’s the same in life. Through that, you get shoes, and you know what you’re doing here will benefit you in the future. It’s not only just going there. You can run anywhere, you can go to some other track and do stuff, or you can run on your own treadmill, but when you go there, there’s a goal. It is a competition involved and things like that. That will help you to grow. That’s good for kids...Sometimes that comes from their parents and maybe, but you can also develop the concept of hard work.”

Discussion

Data from this study suggests that The Organization helps new American families integrate into local communities. Interviewees noted community integration in three significant forms in the interviews: building friendships, increasing socialization, and expanding resources.

The friendships described by interviewees came in both homogenous and diverse forms. Rapp et al. explained that homogenous friendships provide only bonding connections while diverse friendships provide information, trust, and support (2018). Two families expressed a lack of diverse friendships. If this was all The Organization provided, its ability to socially integrate families would be limited. However, most families spoke of building diverse friendship either for themselves or their children through The Organization. The two parents that had primarily homogenous friendships had limited English proficiency. They also lived close to families of a similar cultural background. On the other hand, Amira was able to make diverse connections despite having limited English proficiency as well. She, however, lived far from other Somali families. Arguably, English proficiency and neighbor demographics influence the types of friendships a family will form.

Furthermore, Amira was unique because of her notable extroverted nature. She makes an effort to come to practices with her kids unlike many other non-English speaking parents. She said hello to people she recognized (such as volunteer and head coaches) even if they did not speak the same language. It could be argued that her ability to make diverse connections is tied in part also to her efforts to socialize with others and her increased participation with The Organization.

Samantha, a U.S.-born parent involved with both The Organization and local resettlement programs, explained her observation on the important impact of diverse friendships:

“Social integration...is really important for mental health and in general for the kids. It also, I think is a protection for kids that may feel disenfranchised or isolated. It creates a community and protection so they don’t fall into groups or behaviors that can be self-defeating...[Immigrant youth] are really vulnerable. In Minnesota, there was a large Somali community there. When we first moved there, one of the things that happened because integration wasn’t super great is the youth were really prone to...extremism.”

Forming diverse friendships and meeting “different kinds of kids,” as Helen put it, can protect the youth in these new American families from the mental health issues that so often plague their demographic such as depression and anxiety (Chang, 2015; Chen et al., 2019). The diverse friendships and even athletic activities offer positive coping skills, so youth are better protected from extremist groups.

Friendships made and maintained through The Organization further supported Strang and Quinn’s argument that trust be named a ‘facilitator’ of social integration in the literature (Strang & Quinn, 2021). Parents spoke of the trusting relationships they built with The Organization’s head coaches in 60% of the interviews. It was this trust that enabled all other friendships. It was this trust that gave parents courage to send their children to practices each week. It was this trust that empowered families to take advantage of other community resources that head coaches provided. It was this trust that enabled me to contact and interview families in their homes despite being a stranger to many. Trust was key to building community.

Expanding worldview, or one’s “bubble” as Abrihet put it, is less prevalent in the literature, but widely present in the interviews. A total of 50% of interviewees spoke directly about the idea: one third of these were American and two thirds were Ethiopian/Eritrean. In the former group, Samantha and John were both well-educated. In the latter group, both Abrihet and Abel were well-educated and fluent in English. Helen had limited English proficiency and while she commented on its importance, her discussion of the topic was much briefer in comparison to the others’. English proficiency and education both seem connected with one’s perceived importance of socialization and broadened worldviews.

It could be argued that in a world of polarized political ideas, learning empathy is important to social and political decisions. By becoming aware of others’ experiences, one becomes free from the temporary fancies of political parties and can make decisions that support rather than harm community. Samantha explained the importance of this concept to her:

“I believe that exposure is really important because when you’re at a certain socioeconomic level, it’s really easy to just brush stuff off because it doesn’t affect you, but when you become friends with someone where it does affect them, it changes things... It’s not just about acknowledging privilege. It’s about realizing that maybe what you’re supporting, what you’re voting for...is having negative consequences for someone else you care about. I think that’s where you can really help.”

The Organization provides a space where families of varying backgrounds come to know, understand, trust, and support one another. For the American families, this may mean coming to recognize privileges and making personal decisions that help those with limited opportunities. This increased awareness enables local families to better welcome people that are resettled into their communities and accept them by supporting policies that positively impact their lives. For new American families, this may mean becoming exposed to people in their new country or even people of a migrant background from different countries than them. This expanded worldview is a steppingstone toward forming diverse friendships.

We suggest socialization of both migrant background and local families as an important step in social integration. It provides exposure to increase empathy, inform decision making, and develop diverse friendships.

The Organization further helped new American families overcome barriers to access community resources. This builds community by increasing community participation and opportunities to create diverse networks. In turn, diverse networks offer information about and access to community resources (Rapp et al., 2018; Strang & Quinn, 2021). The Organization spurs a positive cycle as resources foster relationships and relationships foster resources.

A total of 60% of interviewees discussed this impact of The Organization, two thirds of which were new American families and one third of which were U.S. born. The American interviewees spoke as observers who had seen others benefit but not necessarily needed help accessing resources for themselves. The migrant background interviewees spoke from personal experience where The Organization helped them overcome barriers. Because integration is an inter-generational process, providing opportunities like these to the rising generation is critical (Adler Zwahlen et al., 2018). The Organization is successfully focusing on the needs of *new American families* as their mission statement says.

As The Organization helps new American families overcome barriers in terms of finances, time, transportation, and language, it is creating a means for them to integrate into other community opportunities. The Organization is also familiarizing the youth of migrant background families to opportunities that would otherwise be unavailable. This enables them to expand their interests, meet more people their age, and develop ambitious dreams for the future. This The Organization is giving families tools to be integrated long-term and in self-supported ways.

Like the European voluntary sports clubs, The Organization is making significant positive impacts on the health of its participants (Adler Zwahlen et al., 2018; Nagel et al., 2020). However, like these clubs, The Organization goes “beyond sport” (Stura, 2019). The Organization is helping new American families integrate into their local communities.

Although the athleticism and discipline observed by interviewees may be unique to the program’s sports focus, its ability to build community is not. Friendships, socialization, and community resources can all be supported in other contexts. This study suggests that groups built on something other than athletics paired with a mission statement similar to that of The Organization could have a meaningful impact on migrant background families’ integration.

Limitations

This study has limitations. The interviewer has volunteered for The Organization for over two years and therefore did not enter this study as an unbiased investigator. Her association with The Organization and its participants enabled her to contact families because of her former relationship with some of them. However, it may have biased her interview style and analysis in the Organization’s favor.

In addition, this study investigated a small, singular group in Utah. The findings are limited to The Organization but can inform the creation or examination of similar groups. Furthermore, the study interviewed only the parents who are not the main focus of The Organization's activities. The Organization would benefit from future studies that include the voices of youth participants.

We suggest that further research be conducted on similar organizations including those that utilize activities other than athletics to integrate migrant background families. More research is needed in the United States especially where literature on the topic is scarce.

(5,741 words)

Reflection

My dream has always been to try *everything good*. I came to Utah State to study music therapy, but I was itching every semester to take classes that expanded my knowledge in other areas. The Honors Program enabled this by creating opportunities for me to actively learn and challenge myself in disciplines outside my major. The Honors classes helped me explore ideas in sociology and science. Honors Mentoring Agreements supported my research endeavors in math, Spanish, and health. And now the Honors Capstone has pushed me to create a project of my very own, informed by what I learned throughout my undergraduate career.

In the future, I hope to apply to medical school. It is a competitive application process. The Honors Capstone project helped me expand my resume and deepen the significance of my educational experiences. As I apply to schools, I can share not only my completed project and research, but also stories about relationships built and lessons learned along the way.

The learning did not come without a fight. I struggled for weeks to receive IRB approval before I could even begin the project. When I finally was approved, I struggled again contacting families. It was difficult, time consuming, and discouraging. My social brain was exhausted. But it paid off.

In the end, The Organization I worked with to complete this project helped me build community just like it did for participating families. The head coaches and other volunteers mentored and encouraged me. The interviewees shared delicious traditional foods, mind-boggling stories, tokens of appreciation, laughter and hugs. The interpreters kindly donated their time and talents, patiently teaching me pieces of their culture and language. I felt connected to these people as we shared space, time, and support.

One of the most meaningful connections built from this project is that with my mentor Dr. Guadalupe Marquez-Velarde. She was my professor in an Honors course I took several years ago. I loved hearing her insights about the influence of sociology on health. She always challenged us with meaningful assignments, offered useful feedback, and freely shared praise when we improved. When I contacted her about my project idea and asked her to be my mentor, she agreed and immediately helped me see the end from the beginning. She calls me out when I overbook myself. She expresses confidence in my work. She trusts my ideas and lets me know when I am wrong. She sends me presentation and grant opportunities so that I do not miss them. And when deadlines are upon me, she has my back.

As I have spoken with Dr. Marquez-Velarde about my dream to go to medical school, she could have said, "Oh that's great! Good Luck!" Instead, she surprised me and said, "Ok, when do we need to start on applications?" She immediately jumped on my team. I feel spoiled to have Dr. Marquez-Velarde as my mentor and I believe it is a relationship that will endure.

Although my project is outside my major and discipline, my work within music therapy was deepened through my Honors Capstone project. My project spanned over 2 years, overlapping with my Research in Music Therapy course. Because of my project design and previous experience with qualitative research through Honors Mentor Agreements, I had skills to

qualitatively analyze interviews using NVivo. I did not, however, have practice conducting an interview. During my course project, I was able to develop this important skill by interviewing a social worker about attachment theory. I analyzed it in NVivo as I had done previously and connected the theory to music therapy interventions. This topic was particularly important to me because of my personal experiences with attachment theory. My research for this class later became an important part of my application for a music therapy internship I will complete Summer of 2024.

Thus, my capstone deepened my research in music therapy and my research in music therapy deepened my capstone.

I was originally drawn to music therapy because of its unique combination of health and the arts. I had long believed that health was influenced and supported by a variety of factors, both obvious and subtle. My studies in music therapy confirmed that idea and enabled me to support other's health. At first it felt like a super power. Music is often referred to as a universal language. As my understanding of sociology grew, however, I realized that people have such varying experiences with music that it could not be used the same universally.

This understanding grew immensely while completing my capstone. I came to understand the stories, needs, and strengths of immigrants and refugees in United States as well as the depth of their cultural ties and traditions. I realized that music therapy would only be useful for them if I were culturally humble, seeking intercultural mediation where possible. In fact, it is useful for people only when the therapist seeks to understand their background and meet them where they are. This was a principle I was taught for years but came to better appreciate and think critically about through my project.

I was also able to more critically examine ideas in both language (the discipline of my minor) and sociology (the discipline of my research). As I watched children jump through mental hoops to translate for their parents and struggled myself to find qualified interpreters, I wondered what these families' day to day must look like in place where they do not speak the language. I had learned about privilege, but I saw it first-hand when I realized that could understand the drivers' license test and they could not, that I could ask for directions from a stranger on the street and they could not, that I could look at poverty as temporary situation as a student and they could not. My capstone has given me perspective so that I can advocate for my new friends who are resettled here and help them receive the resources they deserve.

My research focused on a small group, but they represent a much larger population of resettled and immigrated individuals across the United States. I was moved to see evidence for the community The Organization is building. I hope not only that this research informs work with similar groups, but that it also informs my life, enabling me to build community wherever I may go.

(1,057 words)

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Appendix I

Recruitment Scripts

Personal Text:

Hi (participant name),

This is coach Alyssa from [the organization] I am researching how [the organization] impacts new American families' connection with the community (see the attached flier). This will help [the organization] improve their program and funding. I would love to hear your insights! Would you be willing to do a 20-30 minute interview with me? You will receive a \$20 Walmart gift card as a thank you for your time.

You qualify to participate if you are:

- 18+ years old
- Currently participating with [the organization] as either a coach, parent, or athlete
- Have attended or sent your child to at least two events [of the organization]
- Not a U.S. born volunteer coach without children participating

Reach out by email, text, or in person with any questions.

Best,

Alyssa

307-441-0453

A02249242@usu.edu

[Principal Investigator: Dr. Guadalupe Marquez-Velarde](#)

guadalupe.marquez-velarde@usu.edu

[IRB Protocol #13004](#)

In person (visiting homes or announcing at practice) or on the phone:

Hi (participant's name)! I'm Alyssa from [the organization]. How are you?

[The head coaches] have asked that I research how [the organization] impacts new American families' connection with the community. This will help [the organization] improve their program and funding. I would love to hear your insights.

You qualify to participate if you are:

- 18+ years old
- Currently participating with [the organization] as either a coach, parent, or athlete
- Have attended or sent your child to at least two events [of the organization]
- Not a U.S. born volunteer coach without children participating

Would you be willing to do a 20-30 minute interview with me? You will receive a \$20 Walmart gift card as a thank you for your time.

You can think about it and let me know if you decide to participate. If you have any questions, you can contact me at 307-441-0453 or a02249242@usu.edu.

For your information the principal investigator is Dr. Guadalupe Marquez-Velarde, a faculty member in the sociology department at USU. We have been approved by the IRB and our protocol number is 13004.

Can I call you in two days and follow up with you?

Thank you so much. Have the best day! Bye

Follow Up Call

Hi (participant's name)! It's Alyssa again. How are you doing?

Have you had a chance to think about participating in an interview?

Is it something you're interested in?

Do you have any questions?

Can I call you again in a week or so and follow up with you?

Thank you again,

Alyssa

Appendix II

Recruitment Flier

(The organization name has been whited out)

Does [redacted] help you
to **Connect?**



Coach Alyssa Burton
307-441-0453
a02249242@aggies.usu.edu

Help us research [redacted]'s impact on social connection.

PARTICIPATE IN A 20-30 MINUTE INTERVIEW IN
YOUR LANGUAGE.

Receive a \$20 Walmart gift card

The purpose is to help [redacted]
improve and expand their
opportunities for you.

Requirements:

- 18+ years old
- current participant, parent, or coach with [redacted]
- have participated in or sent a child to at least 2 [redacted] events
- Not a U.S. born volunteer coach without participating children

Dr. Marquez-Velarde | guadalupe.marquez-velarde@usu.edu

IRB Protocol #13004

Appendix III

Informed Consent (Deidentified)



Research
UtahStateUniversity



Page 1 of 2
Protocol #13004
IRB Approval Date:
Consent Document Expires: May 2027

v.10.3

Informed Consent

The Impact of [The Organization]

Introduction

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Alyssa Burton and Dr. Guadalupe Marquez-Velarde, a student and faculty member at Utah State University. The purpose of this research is to examine how [The Organization] impacts the social connection of immigrant families to their community. We will do this by interviewing adult participants and/or parents of youth participants in [The Organization]. Your participation is entirely voluntary.

This form includes detailed information on research participation to help you decide whether you would like to join or be included. Please read it carefully and ask any questions you have before you agree to participate.

Procedures

Your participation will involve a 20-30 minute in-person or Zoom interview. If wanted/needed, a live translator will be present. In order to determine your eligibility for the study, we will collect data about your relative level participation in [The Organization] from the head coaches by analyzing the number of [The Organization] practices and/or events attended by you or your children. If you agree to participate, we will ask questions about your country of origin, your time with [The Organization], and your social connections. The interviews will be recorded by audio if in person or by video if on zoom. Once the interviews are transcribed, the recordings will be destroyed. We anticipate that 8-15 people will participate in this research study.

Risks

This is a minimal risk research study. That means that the risks of participating are no more likely or serious than those you encounter in everyday activities. This research may involve risks that are not yet known. If you have a bad research-related experience, please contact Dr. Guadalupe Marquez-Velarde at guadalupe.marquez-velarde@usu.edu. If you would like to request safety measures from the research team regarding COVID-19 or other transmissible diseases, please make those requests using the contact information provided for the Principal Investigator below. Utah State University cannot guarantee masking or vaccines, but the researchers may be willing to accommodate any safety requests you have.

Benefits

Participation in this study may directly benefit you by informing improvements for [The Organization] to better help participants like you to become socially integrated. We cannot guarantee that you will directly benefit from this study.

Confidentiality

The researchers will make every effort to ensure that the information you provide as part of this study remains confidential. Your identity will not be revealed in any publications, presentations, or reports resulting from this research study. However, it may be possible for someone to recognize your particular response.

We will collect your information through audio recordings of in-person interviews or video recordings of zoom interviews, and [The Organization] data from the head coaches. The recordings and [The Organization] data will then be transcribed and stored securely online. Online activities always carry a risk of a data breach, but we will use systems and processes that minimize breach opportunities. This information will be securely stored in a restricted-access folder on Box.com, an encrypted, cloud-based storage system. All identifying information such as name, age, address, etc. will be destroyed from the transcriptions. Only country of origin and relative level of participation in [The Organization] (as determined by attendance) will remain on the transcription. Relevant quotes from deidentified transcriptions will be shared with the [The Organization]'s head coaches for the purpose of expanding and supporting the organization. The audio/video recordings will be destroyed after they are transcribed, and the transcriptions, will



be destroyed after four years. The number of practices or events attended will be destroyed. This form will be kept for four years after the study is complete, and then it will be destroyed.

It is unlikely, but possible, that others (Utah State University or state or federal officials) may require us to share the information you give us from the study to ensure that the research was conducted safely and appropriately. We will only share your information if law or policy requires us to do so.

Voluntary Participation & Withdrawal

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. If you agree to participate now and change your mind later, you may withdraw at any time by informing Alyssa Burton. If you choose to withdraw after we have already collected information about you, all collected information will be destroyed. If you decide not to participate, your participation in [The Organization] will not be affected in any way. The researchers may choose to terminate your participation in this research study if live translation in your language is not possible, if there is an error in the translation process, if you become distressed during the interview, or if you are not available when the researchers are available. We will notify you if this is the case.

Compensation

For your participation in this research study, you will receive a \$20 Walmart gift card. Compensation will be received after the completion of the interview whether or not the interview is used for the study. If you choose to withdraw before the interview is complete, you will not receive compensation.

Findings

Identifiers may be removed from your information This de-identified data may be used or distributed for future research without additional consent from you. If you do not wish for us to use your information in this way, please state so below.

IRB Review

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the protection of human research participants at Utah State University has reviewed and approved this study. If you have questions about the research study itself, please contact the Principal Investigator at 307-441-0453 or a02249242@usu.edu. If you have questions about your rights or would simply like to speak with someone *other* than the research team about questions or concerns, please contact the IRB Director at (435) 797-0567 or irb@usu.edu.

Alyssa Burton
Student Researcher
(307) 441-0453; a02249242@usu.edu

Dr. Guadalupe Marquez-Velarde
Primary Investigator
guadalupe.marquez-velarde@usu.edu

Informed Consent

By signing below, you agree to participate in this study. You indicate that you understand the risks and benefits of participation, and that you know what you will be asked to do. You also agree that you have asked any questions you might have, and are clear on how to stop your participation in the study if you choose to do so. Please be sure to retain a copy of this form for your records.

Participant's Signature

Participant's Name, Printed

Date

I do **not** agree to allow my de-identified information to be used or shared for future research.

Appendix IV

The Interview Schedule (Deidentified)

- Where are you from originally?
- How long have you lived in the States?
- How long have you lived in Utah?
- How long has your family participated in The Organization?
- How did you hear about The Organization?
- What is the role of community connections in your life?
 - Has that changed since your move to Utah?
- What community connections have you made because of The Organization?
 - Are these maintained outside of The Organization events?
- How has The Organization impacted you? Your family? Your kids (the participants)?
- What parts of The Organization are particularly important/impactful for you?
- Do you plan to continue participating in The Organization? Why?
- What could The Organization do differently to better support you and your family's needs?