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Promoting the inclusion and well-being of young refugees: lessons from a Danish folk high school

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Background:
Of the refugees recently arriving in Denmark, many are young. Given the importance of host language proficiency and knowledge of everyday practices for refugee integration, this study examined a programme at a Danish folk high school – a

non-formal residential college with an emphasis on physical education and arts – as a method to promote the inclusion and well-being of young refugees.

Methods:

The study was based on two weeks of fieldwork in the Spring of 2017 at a folk high school in rural Denmark working with refugee integration. Participant observation, 10 qualitative interviews (four refugees, four Danish students, the principal and the vice principal) and two focus groups (with Danish and refugee students, respectively) were carried out.

Results:

A stable institution with community-oriented values, the school supported the well-being of refugees and facilitated mutual trust among students. Refugees and the principals viewed the programme as an investment in the refugees' future inclusion and well-being through Danish language acquisition, knowledge of everyday norms and a social network. Activities with a clear common purpose enabled students to interact as equals. However, language barriers impeded social inclusion. Furthermore, Danish and refugee students had different expectations toward the nature of their stay at the school.

Conclusions:

Despite some challenges, the school promoted the well-being and inclusion of refugees by offering a safe haven to learn the language and norms of Danish society and for the students to build relationships. While the study focused on a typically Danish setting, it contains insights useful for promoting refugee integration and well-being in other contexts such as schools or housing projects.

Main messages:

A stable environment based on community-oriented values, the folk high school promoted the inclusion and well-being of young refugees. Insights from the study may be useful for developing integration initiatives in other contexts.