HOPE SHINES, INC.

2012 PROGRAM REPORT

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Purpose

The aim of this study was to evaluate the impact of the programs offered by Hope Shines, Inc., on the health and well-being of their participants. The study also invited feedback from participants, staff and volunteers on ways to improve and enhance the programs.

Background

Hope Shines, Inc. is a 501(c)-3 organization, founded in 2007, dedicated to enhancing the lives of orphans and vulnerable children (OVC) through educational, health and hygiene programs.

With Hope Shines, orphaned children are given hope and the opportunity to expand and grow their minds. Their grassroots strategies offer mentoring from both local and foreign volunteer mentors, support for education, and health and nutritional programs. They are dedicated to the goal of supporting these marginalized children by providing a pathway to a better future.

The agency offers several programs throughout the year. Currently, in 2016, the agency offers 4 primary programs or services:

(i) Basic Needs for Education
(ii) After-school
(iii) Summer Camp
(iv) Health Child Initiative

Rwanda

Rwanda is a landlocked country situated in Central Africa, comprising a total population of approximately 11.25 million (World Bank, 2016). Recent surveys indicated that the percentage of people living under poverty has dropped by 5.8% from 44.9% in 2011 to 39.1% in 2014 (United Nations Development Program, 2015). However, it is still a relatively poor country with the country’s current GDP per capita at US$718 (World Bank, 2016).

According to a situation analysis study conducted by UNICEF and the Prime Minister’s Office on Gender and Family Promotion in Rwanda, there were approximately 2.8 million
children classified as orphaned and vulnerable children (OVC) in 2007. It was estimated that 24.3% of all children in Rwanda were orphans and 59% were non-orphan vulnerable children. The same report posited that nearly 60% of households caring for orphans lived in “extreme” poverty while 63% of households with vulnerable children lived in similar circumstances. One in six (14.6%) orphans and 8.4% of vulnerable children do not attend school. Of those OVC that attend primary school, only one in ten actually continue on to secondary school (UNICEF, 2008). The expense of schooling, lack of psychosocial supports for OVC and low literacy levels among caregivers contributes to low achievement levels among this cohort. Lower literacy levels places OVC at continued risk of poverty and unemployment or under employment. With respect to healthcare, few households with OVC have access to adequate healthcare or safe hygiene. This causes high levels of infections and illnesses among this population (UNICEF, 2008).

Research has shown that community-based programs that increase health and hygiene awareness, and provide access to affordable healthcare help reduce chronic health conditions and repeated infections (Betancourt, Williams, et al., 2012; Thurman, Snider, et al., 2008). Additionally, nutritional supports such as healthy meals and snacks improve overall health, decrease vitamin deficiencies and enhance focus and concentration (Betancourt, Williams, et al., 2012; Frishman, Shelley & Montgomery, 2013). After-school tutoring has been shown to improve academic outcomes, while mentoring programs help students remain motivated to complete their education and plan for their future (Brown, Thurman, et al., 2009; Thomas, 2010; Walque, 2009). Summer camps provide a much needed psychological and emotional respite for children and adolescents from the daily grind of their lives, while offering an outlet to explore their creative and recreational instincts (Farber & Sabatino, 2007; Thurber, Scanlin, Scheuler & Henderson, 2006; Weaver, Beets, et al., 2014).

Methodology

In the summer of 2012, the author visited Kigali, Rwanda at the invitation of the leadership of Hope Shines, Inc. The author spent two weeks in Kigali interviewing various stakeholders to assess the impact of the programs on the lives of the participants.
Sample

The sample comprised of children and adolescents enrolled in two programs in Kigali. The first program (with partner NGO Child Support Center, CSC) was the after-school tutoring program that is offered year-round to the children and adolescents. The second program studied was the Camp program offered for one week in the summer at a local orphanage (Sinapisi) and CSC. Additionally, volunteers at CSC and local coordinators of CSC were also interviewed.

Methods

Focus group sessions were conducted separately with children and adolescents attending CSC and those attending the Sinapisi program. The respondents were placed in groups of 6-8 members each categorized by age. The age groups were 8-12 years, 13-15 years, 16 years and older. In total, six focus group sessions were held with CSC participants and ten focus group sessions were held with Sinapisi participants. One focus group comprising five American volunteers and another with two coordinators were also held. All participation was voluntary and respondents could end their participation at any time or refuse to answer any questions.

The questions for the focus groups were designed by the author of this study based on prior interviews with the leadership of Hope Shines, Inc., as well as a comprehensive review of similar programs in Africa. The focus group sessions were conducted in the local language (Kinyarwanda) with the help of a translator. The translator was not an employee of Hope Shines, Inc. He helped translate the author’s questions for the respondents and their responses. The focus group sessions ranged in 45-90 minutes depending on the size of the focus groups and the age of the respondents. All interviews were recorded on a digital recorder and transcribed once the author returned to the US. No names were recorded or made available to any staff or leadership of Hope Shines, Inc.

Data Analysis

After transcription of all focus group sessions, the author conducted a thorough analysis of the sessions using grounded theory techniques. Emerging themes were identified and refined.
The following discussion of findings is based on the analysis conducted by the author.

Findings

The findings will be discussed in the following order:

(i) CSC Impact on participants
(ii) Sinapisi Summer Camp Impact on participants
(iii) Local coordinators’ feedback
(iv) Reflections of volunteers

CSC Impact on Participants

All the participants reported that the after-school tutoring program was helpful. They appreciated the lunches and snacks provided during the day. The participants reported that their scores in math and science had increased by a minimum of 10 points to 40 points. The students liked their tutors and found them to be patient, responsive and effective. They commented that they looked forward to attending the weekly sessions and it made them want to stay in school and succeed. Students also discussed how they had made friends among their peers and found that to be a positive outcome of their participation.

In terms of continuing needs, the students had several suggestions. The most common concern was expressed by older students (13 years and older). They stated that the students are all placed in one room with one instructor for a specific subject. This means that teachers may take extra time with younger or weaker students. This leaves the older or more advanced students feeling neglected or that their needs are not being met. Frequently, the older students did not get the instruction they expected or the teacher’s attention, making them feel frustrated or unprepared for their coursework. Students suggested having separate sessions for them divided by age and/or aptitude.

Another concern was expressed by students who lived some distance from the location of the tutoring. They stated that they had to miss some sessions due to the lack of money for transportation. They hoped that the agency could provide transportation assistance.
The students shared that as a result of their participation in the tutoring, they felt more confident about their academic prowess and more motivated to complete their schooling. Students expressed their desire to go on to college but were wary of the cost of continuing their education due to financial constraints and the need to provide economic support for their families. When asked about their career goals, the students were divided. While some of the adolescents were clear about becoming teachers, small business owners or professionals, others were unrealistic and unprepared. Many couldn’t explain what resources or training they would need to realize their career goals. It might be helpful to provide career planning services that helps students plan for their future vocations, while exposing them to professionals in the community who could provide mentoring and guidance.

With respect to the health screenings provided once a year in the summer, the children and adolescents did not necessarily look forward to them. However, they reported that their caregivers were grateful for the services. Many of the participants reported that this was the only healthcare screening they had ever received. Some children reported how the medical staff had helped alleviate their pain and discomfort. Most of the participants expressed their love for Stephanie, the doctor, who conducted the screenings.

**Sinapisi Summer Camp Impact on Participants**

All participants shared how they enjoyed and appreciated the summer camp. Boys were more likely to express their interest in the sports activities, while the girls preferred dance lessons and the crafts sessions. The female adolescents also appreciated the sanitary hygiene supplies provided during the camp. The participants loved the lunch provided – many expressed that it was the best meals they would get at the orphanage all-year and looked forward to them. The participants prioritized the fun aspect of the camp more than the educational focus. They liked some of the information being shared by the volunteers, but they stressed that it was not the content as much as the time spent with the volunteers that was important to them. Some hands-on lessons like planting seeds and watching them sprout was fun, others were too age-specific and enjoyed only by a younger or older age group. The participants reported that they felt loved, valued and treasured by the volunteers. They loved the time spent with the volunteers and looked up to them as role models. Older students added that they looked forward to the camp
each year and especially liked volunteers who returned. The younger children were excited about the gifts they received at the end of camp.

One of the common concerns mentioned by the participants was that the volunteers ate separately from the children. This made them feel “different” – some positing that volunteers found the food served to the campers as unhygienic or less palatable. They felt that eating together would bond them further and enhance their sense of fellowship. Older campers, although very appreciative of the gifts, felt that they were more suitable for the younger children. They would have preferred more age-appropriate gifts. All campers, regardless of age, expressed greater interest in trips outside of the camp. When asked to suggest places, they offered parks, museums, and picnics as possible outings. They stated that they rarely had the means or opportunities to leave the orphanage, and the summer camp could be a wonderful opportunity to do so. One suggestion made by campers was to exchange email or contact information with the volunteers so that they may continue communication with them. They felt that after camp ended, they rarely saw or heard from most of the volunteers, and this made them extremely sad. For many orphaned and neglected children, the fear of abandonment is a pervasive emotion, and adds to their lack of trust in developing bonds with others. The nature of the camp (transient nature of volunteers) may give rise to unrealistic expectations and may end up causing more psychological harm in those who are particularly fragile.

Finally, when asked to suggest what impact the camps had had on their lives, the participants mentioned fun, good times, activities and relationships with volunteers. But they were unable to verbalize the psychosocial impact of their participation. This was the response regardless of the age of the campers. Most could not identify the rationale for the camp other than it was a representation of the kindness and generosity of the founders and staff of Hope Shines, Inc.

Local Coordinators’ Feedback

The two coordinators from CSC who helped manage the after-school program met with the author of the study. They expressed their confidence in the program and stated that they had seen first-hand how it had helped the participants. They also shared that the students, in general, had advanced academically as a result of the weekly sessions. They stated that the tutors were
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dedicated, diligent and effective in engaging the students. The coordinator stated that, without this program, many of the students were at risk of dropping out of school or falling back in their classes.

The coordinators introduced the author to the parents or caregivers of the children who also expressed their satisfaction and gratitude for the program. All reported that the sessions had improved their child’s academic standing and had made them more hopeful for the future. They all hoped that Hope Shines, Inc., would continue to provide vocational training or financial assistance for the children if they attended college. Two of the parents suggested that assistance with transportation would be helpful.

The coordinators shared that the meals provided, although nutritious, were limited in terms of choice. They reported that additional forms of protein such as chicken or meat would be helpful. An additional budget would help them offer a more diverse array of meals to the students. The coordinators also suggested that they would like to break up the students by age, but that they would need additional space and more teachers, which would entail further expenses. The coordinators also suggested that providing vocational training to older students would be helpful in preparing students who had the responsibility of providing for their siblings and caregivers.

Reflections of Volunteers

The author met with five American volunteers, two of whom were returnees to the camp. The volunteers were thankful for the opportunity to work with the children and adolescents. They expressed their delight and gratefulness for the opportunity. All volunteers were extremely confident in the leadership of Stephanie and were supportive of her efforts. They believed that Stephanie was mindful of their concerns and needs and was extremely responsive.

The volunteers loved their time with the children and adolescents. They felt connected with the participants and reported feeling fulfilled by their experiences. The volunteers had the most fun when they engaged in specific activities with the children/adolescents.

The volunteers expressed appreciation for the orientation offered prior to the start of the program. But they felt that it was too brief. They suggested some training and preparation prior to their arrival in Kigali, and an extended training session upon their arrival. Some felt
unprepared for the physical and emotional rigor of the program and could have used greater support and planning. The volunteers stated that their accommodations were adequate and the transportation and food provided were excellent. They felt bonded with one another for the most part.

Some of the concerns expressed by volunteers centered around inter-personal conflicts. One of the volunteers, who was a veteran of the program, may have contributed to some conflict with the new volunteers as she felt she was an assistant supervisor, while the others did not feel that way. This led to some friction between the volunteers and hurt feelings. Nevertheless, all the volunteers reported that they managed to do their best for the children despite their disagreements. They suggested that all roles and responsibilities be precisely laid out prior to the start of the camp, so that there is no confusion about the lines of authority.

The volunteers suggested that the activities offered in camp be separated by age groups, as it was hard to keep all the participants attentive and engaged at all times. Additionally, the volunteers would have liked to review all classes and sessions in more detail so that they could feel more confident during implementation. Finally, the volunteers expressed their appreciation and admiration for the local staff who assisted in the camp activities. They felt that they were extremely dedicated and helpful in facilitating the activities.

Recommendations

It is important to note the strengths of the programs offered by Hope Shines, Inc. They can be summarized as follows:

(a) The volunteers, staff and leadership are seen as dedicated, committed and caring. The children and adolescents have built lasting bonds with the April, the founder and Executive Director, Stephanie, the Medical Consultant and Camp Director, the local staff and the various volunteers. These folks also serve as valuable role models for the participants.

(b) The after-school tutoring program has helped the participants improve academically while promoting an awareness of health and hygiene. Additionally, the participants report increased motivation to stay in school, graduate and pursue professional or vocational careers.
(c) The summer camp provides fun, education and an outlet for recreational activities in a supportive and structured manner. The participants look forward to the camp each year and it serves as a highlight of their summer. The camaraderie developed with staff and volunteers is helpful in building trust among the children/adolescents.

(d) The supports, such as nutrition, gifts, female hygiene supplies and stationary were helpful and valued by the participants.

There are areas in which Hope Shines, Inc., could improve its programming in order to enhance the health, educational and wellness outcomes for the participants. The following are some general recommendations based on the feedback provided by the participants, volunteers, staff and coordinators:

(a) The tutoring program at CSC should take into account the ages of the participants, as well as their level of academic functioning. More targeted classes aimed at specific grades and academic functioning levels of students would ensure an optimal learning experience for all participants. Perhaps the day could be divided into periods or sessions and students would only attend those sessions deemed appropriate for them.

(b) The nutritional support at the tutoring program could be enhanced to include more choices and options.

(c) Financial assistance for those travelling long distances to the tutoring program should be considered.

(d) The summer camp should also offer some educational programs or informational workshops separately for different age groups. This would ensure age-appropriate instructional designs and materials, and ensure more focused learning outcomes.

(e) The gifts offered to participants, while appreciated, may not be suitable for all age groups. Some attention needs to be paid when soliciting gifts and giveaways prior to the summer camp.

(f) There may be some obstacles to eating together for volunteers, staff and participants. But perhaps the agency could be creative and provide avenues for all to share their meals, thereby increasing camaraderie and reducing a sense of otherness.
(g) The participants in the summer camp would really appreciate trips out to the city or the country – like museums, national parks, etc. They have very few chances to do so on their own and this would significantly enhance their experience.

(h) Some methods of continuing communication with the agency staff or volunteers after the end of the summer camp would be valuable and critical to trust building. There may be issues of privacy that need to be addressed, but a general website or Facebook page could be developed to engage volunteers, staff and participants. Strict guidelines could be developed to prevent inappropriate communication or requests for money from participants/local staff.

(i) The participants, at CSC and the summer camp, need guided mentoring from community leaders and professionals. These individuals could help the participants plan purposefully and realistically for their future vocations. This is critical, as most participants, had only a vague idea of what they wanted to do when they became adults.

(j) The learning achieved at the camp needs to be reinforced throughout the year. One week is too short for the impact to be long-lasting and sustainable. Perhaps, the agency could explore online tutorials or hire local staff to provide ongoing instruction and support.

(k) Given the current developmental stage of the agency, professional expertise and consultants could assist the agency in designing more effective programs and curricula.

(l) A structured and comprehensive orientation and training for all volunteers would be helpful. This could help alleviate some anxiety and better prepare them for work with the participants. The passion and energy of the volunteers is electric. However, they come from diverse backgrounds and may not have the technical skills or emotional capacity needed to be effective in achieving the outcomes of the programs. Also, a clear delineation of roles and responsibilities would reduce inter-personal conflicts and tension.

(m) The following concern is solely based on an observation by the author. While the permissible age for drinking in Rwanda is lower than in the US, there were no clear guidelines about US volunteers drinking in Rwanda. During the visit of this author, there was a minor (16-year old) volunteer serving with 21+ aged volunteers at a restaurant. From this incident, Hope Shines, Inc. immediately implemented a strict policy that does not allow under any circumstance, a person under the age of 21 years to be served alcohol.
in Rwanda. I believe this policy was needed and I am told that the incident has not occurred since.

**Conclusion**

Hope Shines, Inc., is a wonderful program that provides educational, psychosocial and emotional supports to children and adolescents from vulnerable families. It has achieved significant results given the limited resources available to them. The program can continue to grow and enhance their outcomes, thereby improving the lives of their participants. However, the organization is now in the middle-stage of its developmental lifespan and needs to take critical measures to ensure its sustainability. Written guidelines and policies are needed, as well as structured curricula, enhanced training for staff and volunteers, and focused, age-specific programming to achieve significant results. At this juncture, working in a solitary manner will only stunt its growth. Developing partnerships with other NGOs, public agencies and community leaders will increase its resources and create a more sustainable organization. Strategic planning efforts will ensure that the agency realize its lofty goals and make a significant impact on those it serves.
References


and staff physical activity promotion in summer day camps. *New Directions for Youth Development, 2014*(143), 57-78.